Why is the Northeast on the boil?

In Assam, Tripura and Meghalaya, what is the unease over the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019?

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The story so far: Curfew was eased on Saturday for some hours in towns and cities of the Brahmaputra Valley including Guwahati in lower Assam and Dibrugarh in upper Assam after days of violent protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 since the Bill was passed by the Rajya Sabha on December 11 and the President of India gave his assent on December 12. Some States were kept outside the purview of the Act, which will grant citizenship to Hindus and other non-Muslim minorities of three countries, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Pakistan, under the Sixth Schedule and the inner line permit (ILP) system, but there is unease on the ground about what it will mean for the ethnic diversity of the region. In Assam, for example, observers say the division between the Assamese-speaking Brahmaputra Valley and the Bengali-speaking Barak Valley is likely to deepen; and that relations between tribals and the Bengali-speaking majority in Tripura will suffer. The rules of CAA under which Hindu and other minorities may get amnesty have not yet been specified.

Why is Assam agitated?
Between 1979 and 1985, the All Assam Students’ Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad spearheaded a movement against illegal migration, which had been simmering for long, leading to widespread violence and insurgencies by various outfits including the United Liberation Front of Assam. After thousands of lives were lost, the Assam Accord was signed in 1985 that aimed to address two key concerns of the Assamese people: stop “foreigners” from Bangladesh and provide some constitutional safeguards for Assamese citizens. First, the cut-off date for foreigners to gain citizenship was set at March 25, 1971, though, initially, the leaders of the movement wanted illegal migrants to be expelled as per the National Register of Citizens 1951 of Assam; agitation leaders had also spoken of a 1967 cut-off; and Clause 6 of the Accord stated that “constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards, as may be appropriate, shall be provided to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people.” The AASU on Friday filed a petition in the Supreme Court of India challenging the Act, according to the outfit’s chief adviser Samujjal Bhattacharya. He told a gathering which had defied curfew to protest against the Act: “[Narendra] Modi had promised to deport all illegal immigrants after May 16, 2014. He did not send back a single illegal Bangladeshi, instead he is now welcoming them.”

According to Census 2011, Assam has a population of 3.12 crore, with 61.47% Hindus, and 34.22% Muslims. Around 12.44% of the population is tribal, comprising Bodos and others. Tribal States of the Northeast have got protection from the CAA with the ILP system, unlike Assam.

What about protection under the Sixth Schedule?

The CAA, 2019, while inserting a new sub-section 6B, listing out the provisions to grant citizenship rights to Hindu and other non-Muslim minorities of three countries, says “nothing in this section shall apply to tribal area[s] of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram or Tripura as included in the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution and the area covered under ‘The Inner Line’ notified under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873”.

The Sixth Schedule allows constitution of autonomous district councils in tribal areas: of Assam (three), Meghalaya (three), Mizoram (three) and Tripura (one) — 10 in all in the Northeast. Thus in Assam, there are the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (for the Karbi Anglong District), the Dima Hasao Autonomous Council (for the Dima Hasao or the erstwhile North Cachar Hills District) and the Bodoland Territorial Council (The Bodoland Territorial Areas District). These regions are exempt from the purview of the Act.

How does the Inner Line Permit help?

As Home Minister Amit Shah met political and civil society groups from the region, one of the suggestions that came up was to expand the ILP system. The ILP regulates the visit of outsiders to States under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873. It was in force in three northeastern States, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland, but on Wednesday, Manipur too came under the ILP regime, a demand of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government of the State. The ILP was withdrawn from Manipur in 1950. The State government’s attempts to reintroduce it through three bills led to violent protests by tribals in 2015. Chief Minister N.
Biren Singh mooted the idea again in 2018 and one of the bills, the Manipur People’s Protection Bill, was passed after consultations with all stakeholders including tribals. The bill, which is awaiting the President’s approval, sought to introduce a system similar to the ILP, regulating the entry of outsiders. After the Centre extended ILP to the State, Mr Singh said its implementation would protect the indigenous people of the State.

Manipur has a population of 28.56 lakh, according to the 2011 Census, with 41.39% Hindus and 41.29% Christians and a host of tribes including the Tangkhul Nagas and Kukis.

In Nagaland too, Dimapur, the commercial hub of the State which had been outside the ILP, was brought under its purview. Dimapur has a large population of non-tribals. The Nagaland government notification says that every non-tribal person who settled or entered Dimapur on or after November 21, 1979, will have to obtain an ILP within 90 days. Now that Dimapur too has become a “tribal belt”, all 12 districts of Nagaland are under ILP. As the National Register of Citizens was being updated in Assam last year, the Nagaland Tribes Council, Tribal Hohos and a group of civil organisations petitioned the State government to seek changes in the colonial era law (Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation 1873) to bring the entire State under ILP to protect the “indigenous people” from outsiders, including “illegal migrants” from Bangladesh. Around 19 lakh people have been left out of the final NRC list and have to prove their citizenship in Assam’s foreigners’ tribunals.

**Why are Tripura and Meghalaya rattled?**

After the passage of the Bill, Mr. Shah met delegations of the Indigenous People’s Front of Tripura, which is an ally of the BJP in the State, and Tripura’s royal family head, Kirit Pradyot Deb Barman, who later tweeted: “Told him [Shah] we are going to SC [Supreme Court] against CAB as we cannot compromise! No retreat no surrender!” Around 32% of the people of Tripura, which has a population of about 36 lakh, are tribal. In 2015, after insurgency appeared to have waned, the Tripura government revoked the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, or AFSPA. The AFSPA, which had been in force in the State since 1997, was repealed after elections to the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council. It had been a long-standing demand of tribal parties such as the Indigenous Nationalist Party of Tripura and the Indigenous Peoples Front of Tripura. After the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill was passed, protests broke out in at least four districts, shattering years of peace. Journalist Patricia Mukhim wrote in the Mint: “The state has been overrun by migrants, first from East Pakistan and later from Bangladesh. Now, the Bengali-speaking population is a majority in Tripura and runs the affairs of the state. Fears of a similar fate are real and widely held across all states in the region.”

Most of Meghalaya is protected from CAB because of the Sixth Schedule — some areas of capital Shillong, however, fall outside its purview. But there is a demand to extend ILP to the State. Protesters want the Governor, Tathagata Roy, to give his nod to a proposed ordinance that seeks mandatory registration of outsiders entering the State. There were protests against Tura MP, Agatha Sangma (daughter of P.A. Sangma and sister of Chief Minister Conrad Sangma), who voted in favour of the CAB for the National People’s Party, an NDA ally.