

Two Models of Political Integration in the Northeast Frontier after India's Independence

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Abstract: The Northeast of India boasts important geographic and strategic value because of its unique geographical location and borderland nature. Political integration of the Northeastern frontier region is a major issue facing India after its independence. India's political integration started with the merger of Princely States and the adjustment of state-level zoning, then experiencing the models of "stability-security" and "development-synergy". After years of adjustment and exploration, Indian government has achieved remarkable progress in the political integration of the Northeastern frontier region.

1. Introduction

At the beginning of its independence, India formally completed the merger of the Northeastern frontier princely states. After decades of constant friction and adjustment, India gradually improved the state-level planning of the Northeast and formed a relatively stable political structure. In the process of decades-long adjustment, the Indian government is also committed to the completion of political integration of the Northeastern regions, and to building the Northeastern frontier's identity with India's state and power. Therefore, taking the identity of the members of the community to the existing system as the goal, and considering the dimension of time, the Indian government has experienced two modes of political integration in the Northeastern frontier region: the "stability-security" mode and the "development-synergy" mode.

2. "Stability-security" Model

After inheriting the "legacy" of the British colonists, India has accepted the Northeastern frontier as of administration and territorial concepts. However in practice, it still follows the British way of thinking in order to protect the tribal areas in the Northeastern frontier from intrusion and practically encloses them. The logic behind is to ensure national security and regional stability in name, while resorting to easy and political solution in essence. With the "stability-security" model, India's political integration in the Northeast can be divided into two stages: passive and active.

The "passive" stage corresponds to Nehru's ruling period. The early Indian rulers had a narrow understanding of the Northeastern frontier region. They only regarded it as a strange place far from the mainland and particularized and marginalized the Northeastern frontier region in the process of national development. Even Nehru once said, "It seems to me that it is just as undesirable to shock the tribesmen with political and economic forces and let them disturb their original good life and culture as to isolate them." [1] Therefore, the idea of political integration in Nehru period is not to interfere the way of life and values of the Northeastern frontier region under the premise of stability of the frontier.[2] This is to gain the positive response of the Northeastern frontier region to the new regime and strengthen the national identity. But this way of thinking also has obvious drawbacks. On the one hand, this relatively enclosed environment is not conducive to the economic development of the Northeastern frontier region, making it a "vacancy" in the early stage of India's economic development; on the other hand, this practice hinders the communication and integration between the mainland and the frontier, and reinforces the nationalist concepts of the Northeastern frontier region. This has laid the foundation for the subsequent national separatist movement.

The “active” stage corresponds to the post-conflict of the China-Indian border and the pre-enactment of the Northeast India Restructuring Act in 1971. In October 1962, a large-scale armed conflict broke out on the China-Indian border, which resulted in the defeat of the Indian army. The major military defeat also forced the Indian government to re-examine its previous policy towards the Northeast, and to refocus on the Northeastern frontier. India came to recognize its importance to India's national defense and its key role in geopolitics. The Indian government's attitude began to change from “passive” to “active”, and the idea of political integration in this period was to strengthen the effective integration and control of military and political affairs under the premise of border security. The Indian government has not only invested more military power in the Northeast, but also built much infrastructure for military purposes, which has also immeasurably improved the local productivity and living conditions. In addition, in 1968, the Indian Government incorporated the Indian Frontier Administrative Service (IFAS), an administrative system originally operated by the Northeastern frontier region, into the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) for unified management of the Northeastern frontier region. [2] This is also an effective integration of resources in the Northeastern frontier region at the level of public management and service. This security-oriented approach ensures the stability and security of the Northeastern frontier region, and its large-scale military forces have also played an important role in suppressing the national separatist movement in the future. However, this way of thinking still neglects the economic and social development of the Northeastern frontier region, resulting in a growing gap between the development of the frontier and the mainland. It can be said that the central government's attention to the Northeast is still based on the security threats at home and abroad, and has not completely reversed the logic chain behind it. Therefore, its political integration also contains many dangers.

3. “Development-synergy” Model

After experiencing the value-oriented political integration model of “stability” and “security”, the central government of India has become increasingly aware of the importance of the Northeastern frontier region to India, especially in national defense, political, social and economic areas. Therefore, the Indian central government has formulated a “development-coordination” political integration model for the Northeastern frontier region, representing a substantive change of the Indian central government's political integration pathway. Similarly, this model can also be divided into two stages, one is the “restructuring” stage and the other is the “opening” stage.

The stage of “restructuring” mainly includes two aspects: one is to adjust and reorganize the state-level system in Northeast, so as to meet the requirements of building a language state, safeguard the political rights and interests of tribal people, and curb the national separatist movement.[3] The Reorganization Act of Northeast India, promulgated in 1971, marks the beginning of the “reorganization” stage and is also a guiding document for Pradesh-level regionalization. As mentioned earlier, on the basis of that, it took nearly two decades for India to complete the final reorganization of the state-level division of the Northeastern frontier, and its pattern has remained to this day. Second, the Indian government began to use economic means to cultivate the recognition of the state power and the central government in the Northeastern frontier region. For example, the Northeast Indian Commission established in 1971 to promote the political, economic and social development of the Northeastern frontier region became the main body to coordinate the development of the Northeastern frontier states after the completion of integration of the Northeast states. It was also because of the establishment of this commission that “Northeast” became a specific political term and was widely used. In addition to the special development planning commission, the Indian government has invested heavily in the Northeastern frontier. In addition to the annual financial investment to the states, the State Bank of India leads major banks in providing credit services to the Northeastern frontier region. From the above we can see that the Indian government's means of political integration are more diversified, with more focus on the development of the Northeastern frontier region, which is no longer regarded as the “absent person” in the process of national development. This is the change of Indian government's political integration mentality, and also implies the logical turn behind it.

The landmark event of the “open” stage was the proposal of the “Look East Policy” (LEP) in 1992. Of course, the “Look East Policy” of this period only emerged as a policy concept. Its original purpose was to strengthen relations with Southeast Asia, and it was India's foreign strategy against the new international backdrop. This includes not only economic factors, but also India's attempts to expand its political influence.[4] In the framework of the “Look East Policy”, the Northeastern frontier region of India has become an important fulcrum of the strategy, meaning that the Indian government has begun to face up to the frontier attributes of the Northeast Region, and to transform the frontier attributes into regional advantages, and to seek regional cooperation with the surrounding countries. With the improvement of the “Look East Policy”, it will also be extended to the whole East Asia and South Pacific region. To some extent, it is a reflection of India's own vision of a major power. There is no doubt that the “Look East Policy” will bring a series of development opportunities to India's Northeastern frontier region. The emphasis on national strategy enables the Northeastern frontier region to recognize its own position and strengthen its own identity and sense of belonging. On the premise of maintaining the identity of the members of the political community to the existing political system, the Indian government no longer blindly emphasizes the security attributes and closed management of the Northeastern frontier, but pushes the Northeastern frontier into a more rational, internationalized and strategic development path. In this way, the development of the Northeastern frontier will be linked up with the development of the Mainland and the surrounding countries. As Jairam Ramesh, India's Former Minister of Commerce, said, the future of Northeast India lies in emotional and political integration with the rest of India, followed by economic integration with the rest of Asia. [3]

4. Conclusion

After independence, India's political integration of the Northeastern frontier has gone through a lengthened process, and has different integration concepts in different stages. During the British colonial period, it was more a kind of horizontal integration, aiming at the merger and conquest of independent kingdoms; after India's independence, it turned to vertical integration in order to integrate it into the process of national integration. After the merger of princely states, the Indian government continuously adjusted its mentality on the political integration of the Northeastern frontier region, from the “stability-security” model to the “development-synergy” model, in order to solve the identity status of the members of the community to the existing system, to minimize other adverse factors, and at the same time, based on the unique frontier attributes of the Northeastern region, to give it new vitality and opportunities for development.

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