A Review on Integration of Tripura into the Indian Union (1949)

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ABSTRACT

The integration of Tripura into the Indian Union in 1949 represents a significant episode in the broader process of post-independence nation-building in India. As a princely state ruled by the Manikya dynasty for centuries, Tripura entered the post-1947 political landscape amid complex challenges, including the lapse of British paramountcy, geopolitical vulnerability, and the massive demographic transformation caused by the Partition of India. Surrounded on three sides by East Pakistan, the state's strategic location made its accession and eventual merger with India both politically urgent and nationally significant. This review paper examines the historical background of Tripura's integration, the political negotiations that culminated in the Merger Agreement of 1949, and the subsequent administrative transition from monarchical rule to constitutional governance. It critically analyzes the political implications of integration, including democratization, centre–state relations, and the restructuring of governance institutions. At the same time, the paper explores the profound social consequences of demographic shifts, particularly the impact of refugee influx on tribal identity, land relations, and ethnic politics. The study argues that while integration strengthened territorial unity, facilitated modernization, and embedded Tripura within India's federal democratic framework, it also generated long-term socio-political challenges linked to identity and representation. Through synthesizing historical, political, and sociological perspectives, this review highlights the dual character of integration as both a consolidating and transformative process. The experience of Tripura underscores the importance of inclusive governance and sensitive policy-making in managing diversity within a federal system.

Key Words: Tripura Integration, Partition of India, Ethnic Identity, Northeast India, Demographic Change.

1. Introduction

The political integration of princely states into the Indian Union after 1947 remains[1] one of the most consequential processes in the consolidation of postcolonial India. At independence, the subcontinent consisted of British-administered provinces and 565 princely states that exercised varying degrees of internal autonomy under British paramountcy. The lapse of colonial authority in August 1947 created a constitutional vacuum, compelling these states to choose accession to either India or Pakistan. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that integration was not merely a constitutional mechanism but a foundational act of territorial consolidation that shaped the federal character of the Indian Republic (Tillin 2016; Baruah 2020). The incorporation of princely states thus laid the structural groundwork for India's democratic and administrative expansion into frontier regions. Within this broader framework, Tripura occupies a distinctive position in the political history of Northeast India. As a princely state ruled by the Manikya dynasty until 1949, Tripura maintained monarchical continuity even under colonial indirect rule. However, the geopolitical upheaval caused by Partition drastically altered its strategic and demographic realities. Located along a sensitive international border and surrounded on three sides by East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), Tripura emerged as a frontier zone of security concern and humanitarian crisis (Haokip 2018). The influx of refugees from East Pakistan after 1947 fundamentally reshaped the state's

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[1] Chatterjee, C. (2023). *The Partition of the Indian Subcontinent (1947) and Beyond: Uneasy Borders*. Routledge India.

demographic composition, generating long-term consequences for ethnic identity, land ownership, and political representation (McDuie-Ra 2016). The formal integration of Tripura into the Indian Union on 15 October 1949 through a Merger Agreement signified the end of monarchical sovereignty and the beginning of centralized constitutional governance. Recent scholarship on state formation in Northeast India argues that such integrations must be viewed not only as administrative transformations but also as social restructurings that redefined power relations between indigenous communities and migrant populations (Baruah 2020; Wouters and McDuie-Ra 2017). In Tripura, demographic transition gradually shifted the balance between tribal communities and Bengali settlers, influencing electoral politics, cultural discourse, and autonomy movements in subsequent decades. The central research problem of this study is to critically examine how the integration of Tripura into the Indian Union influenced its political evolution[2] and social structure. While integration narratives at the national level often emphasize unity and modernization, regional scholarship highlights the layered realities of identity negotiation, autonomy demands, and developmental disparity (Tillin 2016; Haokip 2018). This paper seeks to analyze whether integration functioned as an inclusive democratic expansion or whether it simultaneously intensified socio-ethnic marginalization within the state.

2. Historical Background of Tripura Before Integration

2.1 Ancient and Medieval Political Structure

The historical evolution of Tripura is deeply rooted in its long-standing monarchical traditions, particularly under the Manikya dynasty, which governed the region for several centuries. Historical reinterpretations in recent scholarship emphasize that the political identity of Tripura developed through layered interactions between indigenous tribal institutions and evolving court-centered authority structures (Wouters and McDuie-Ra 2017). While the *Rajmala*, the royal chronicle of Tripura, traces the dynasty's origins to mythological antiquity, historically verifiable records place consolidated rule around the thirteenth century. The Manikya rulers exercised authority over both hill and plain regions, extending influence into parts of present-day Bangladesh, thereby shaping a cross-border political and cultural sphere.

Manikya Dynasty Rule: The Manikya kings developed a centralized monarchy that coexisted with tribal governance systems. Authority was not purely absolutist; rather, it reflected negotiated relationships between the royal court and indigenous chiefs. Recent studies on Northeast state formation suggest that such hybrid political arrangements were common in frontier monarchies, where centralized power operated alongside customary autonomy (Baruah 2020). Over time, especially after administrative shifts toward the plains, Bengali cultural and administrative practices influenced the royal court, producing a syncretic political culture that blended tribal traditions with Hindu monarchical norms.

Administrative Framework: Tripura's administrative organization evolved gradually from clan-based authority systems into a more structured bureaucratic arrangement. The kingdom was divided into administrative units supervised by royal officials, while tribal councils retained authority in hill regions. Contemporary analyses of indigenous governance in Northeast India note that such dual systems reflected pragmatic accommodation rather than uniform centralization (Haokip 2018). Revenue collection relied primarily on agrarian taxation and tribute networks, and judicial authority combined customary law with emerging codified practices influenced by neighboring Bengal.

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[2] Taylor, D., & Shrimankar, D. (2024). The centre and the states: Evolution of a union. In *The Territories and States of India 2024* (pp. 3-14). Routledge.

Cultural and Social Organization: Tripura's society was ethnically diverse, with indigenous communities such as the Tripuri, Reang, Jamatia, and Noatia forming the demographic core prior to the twentieth century. Social organization was clan-based, governed by customary laws regulating land, kinship, and inheritance. Cultural practices included oral literature, agricultural festivals like Garia Puja, and linguistic traditions centered on Kokborok. Recent scholarship on identity formation in Northeast India emphasizes that such cultural pluralism formed the basis of later political mobilization when demographic change disrupted established balances (Wouters and McDuie-Ra 2017). The gradual interaction with Bengali administrators and settlers produced both cultural exchange and structural tension, laying foundations for later ethnic contestations.

2.2 British Colonial Influence [3]

Tripura as a Princely State under British Paramountcy: During the colonial period, Tripura retained its status as a princely state under British paramountcy. Although not annexed into British India, it entered subsidiary alliances that transferred external affairs and defense oversight to colonial authorities while preserving internal autonomy. Modern historiography interprets such arrangements as instruments of indirect rule designed to secure frontier stability without direct administrative burden (Tillin 2016). Tripura's geographical position between Bengal and Burma enhanced its strategic importance as a buffer region, aligning its political trajectory with broader imperial security calculations.

Political Autonomy and Limitations: While the Manikya rulers-maintained authority over internal administration, their sovereignty was limited by colonial supervision. British political agents influenced succession, mediated disputes, and shaped fiscal policies. Recent research on federal transitions in India underscores how colonial-era indirect governance structures later influenced post-independence integration frameworks (Tillin 2016). Thus, Tripura's autonomy was conditional rather than absolute, embedding it gradually within larger administrative networks even before formal integration into India.

Economic and Administrative Reforms during Colonial Period: The colonial period witnessed gradual economic transformation, particularly agricultural expansion in the plains and infrastructural development linking Tripura with Bengal. Roads, communication lines, and educational institutions emerged during this era. However, uneven development patterns favored plains regions and migrant populations, while many tribal communities remained socio-economically marginalized. Contemporary borderland studies highlight how such disparities in frontier regions often intensified postcolonial identity politics (McDuie-Ra 2016). In Tripura, economic modernization under colonial indirect rule contributed to structural imbalances that later influenced political mobilization.

2.3 Tripura During Partition (1947)

Refugee Influx from East Pakistan: The Partition of India in 1947 profoundly reshaped Tripura's demographic and political landscape. Due to its proximity to East Pakistan, Tripura became a major destination for Hindu refugees fleeing communal violence and political instability. Migration into frontier states during Partition is increasingly analyzed as a transformative force in borderland politics, altering resource distribution and identity narratives (Haokip 2018). The scale of refugee settlement placed pressure on land, administration, and social cohesion, creating new political dynamics.

Demographic Shifts: Prior to Partition, indigenous tribal communities constituted a demographic majority. However, sustained refugee influx gradually altered this balance, reducing tribal populations to a minority over subsequent decades. Recent analyses of Northeast identity politics demonstrate that

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[3] Brownfoot, J. N. (2022). Memsahibs in colonial Malaya: A study of European wives in a British colony and protectorate 1900-1940. In *The incorporated wife* (pp. 186-210). Routledge.

demographic transitions often reshape electoral patterns, language policy, and cultural discourse (Baruah 2020). In Tripura, land alienation and administrative restructuring intensified perceptions of marginalization among tribal groups, contributing to future mobilization movements.

Security Concerns: Tripura's location along an international border generated significant security concerns during and after Partition. The porous boundary facilitated migration but also heightened fears of instability and external interference. Contemporary scholarship on India's frontier governance argues that border states were integrated rapidly to secure territorial control and ensure administrative uniformity (Tillin 2016). Thus, the merger of Tripura in 1949 was influenced not only by constitutional logic but also by strategic imperatives shaped by border vulnerability and demographic upheaval. The interplay of monarchy, colonial indirect rule, and Partition-driven transformation created the structural conditions that made integration both necessary and consequential.

3. Political Context of Integration (1947–1949)

3.1 Accession Process: The integration of Tripura into the Indian Union must be examined within the broader constitutional restructuring that followed the end of British paramountcy in 1947. The lapse of colonial authority created a situation in which princely states were legally sovereign and required to determine their political future. Contemporary scholarship interprets this phase not merely as a legal transition but as a decisive moment in postcolonial state formation, where territorial consolidation became central to the survival of the Indian Union (Tillin 2016). The Government of India encouraged rulers to sign the Instrument of Accession, transferring authority over defense, foreign affairs, and communications while allowing internal autonomy during the transitional period. Recent analyses of federal formation emphasize that accession agreements were strategic instruments designed to balance sovereignty concerns with national integration (Sahoo 2018).

Instrument of Accession: Tripura signed the Instrument of Accession in 1947, aligning itself with India in matters of sovereignty while retaining internal administrative continuity. Given its geographical position—surrounded on three sides by East Pakistan the state's viability as an independent entity was severely constrained. Borderland scholarship highlights that frontier princely states were particularly vulnerable to geopolitical pressures during Partition (McDuie-Ra 2016). Accession therefore represented a strategic decision shaped by security realities rather than ideological alignment alone. However, accession did not dissolve princely authority immediately; instead, it initiated a transitional phase that culminated in the full merger of 1949.

Role of Maharani Kanchan Prava Devi (Regent): After the death of Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya in 1947, Maharani Kanchan Prava Devi assumed regency due to the minority of the heir. Her leadership coincided with intense political uncertainty, including refugee influx, financial instability, and administrative strain. Recent scholarship on Northeast political transitions emphasizes the importance of negotiated settlements in frontier integration processes (Wouters and McDuie-Ra 2017). In Tripura's case, the Regent's negotiations with the Government of India facilitated a peaceful transfer of authority. Unlike certain other princely states where military intervention was required, Tripura's integration followed a diplomatic path rooted in administrative pragmatism and geopolitical necessity.

Merger Agreement (1949): The Merger Agreement, signed in September 1949 and implemented on 15 October 1949, formally transferred full governing authority to the Government of India. Contemporary federalism studies interpret such mergers as the second phase of integration, where symbolic sovereignty was replaced by centralized constitutional governance (Tillin 2016). Tripura's reclassification as a Part C state marked the end of monarchical rule and the beginning of centralized administration. This transition embedded Tripura within India's constitutional order while reshaping its institutional structures.

3.2 Role of Indian Leadership [4]

Policy of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel

The integration of princely states was shaped by a strategic vision of territorial unity and national security. Modern historical analyses characterize the integration policy as a blend of persuasion, negotiation, and administrative coordination aimed at preventing fragmentation (Baruah 2020). Frontier states such as Tripura were considered strategically vital due to their border location and demographic volatility. The incorporation of northeastern territories was therefore viewed not only as constitutional consolidation but also as geopolitical stabilization.

Ministry of States: The Ministry of States coordinated negotiations, drafted agreements, and facilitated administrative transitions. Recent scholarship argues that this institutional mechanism played a crucial role in transforming princely polities into components of a centralized federal system (Sahoo 2018). In Tripura's case, administrative negotiations accounted for internal instability and refugee pressures. The structured transition reflected a broader integration strategy that sought stability before democratization.

National Integration Strategy: India's national integration strategy emphasized phased incorporation first consolidating political authority and then expanding representative institutions. Studies on Northeast governance note that frontier integration often followed a security-first model due to cross-border vulnerabilities (Haokip 2018). Tripura's merger aligned with this model. Central administration preceded the gradual introduction of democratic structures, reflecting a deliberate sequencing of political consolidation and institutional reform.

3.3 Administrative Transition [5]

From Princely Rule to Chief Commissioner's Province: Following the merger, Tripura was designated as a Part C state under a Chief Commissioner appointed by the President of India. Scholars analyzing postcolonial administrative transitions argue that such arrangements allowed the Centre to stabilize governance in politically sensitive regions before granting full statehood (Tillin 2016). This shift symbolized the movement from hereditary sovereignty to bureaucratic constitutional governance.

Governance Restructuring: Administrative restructuring involved aligning revenue, judiciary, policing, and public administration with national frameworks. Borderland governance research indicates that such restructuring often produced both modernization and tensions, especially where indigenous authority structures were reshaped (McDuie-Ra 2016). In Tripura, centralization initially limited local tribal participation in decision-making, contributing to later political mobilization.

Legal and Constitutional Changes: Integration brought Tripura under the Constitution of India (1950), extending fundamental rights and democratic institutions to the state's population. Recent studies on federal negotiation in Northeast India highlight that constitutional mechanisms later evolved to address autonomy demands, including institutional safeguards for tribal areas (Wouters and McDuie-Ra 2017). Thus, Tripura's integration reflects a negotiated transformation shaped by strategic vulnerability, national consolidation, and administrative pragmatism. The transition from princely sovereignty to constitutional democracy laid the structural foundation for later political developments, including autonomy movements and federal renegotiations.

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[4] Agarwal, U. A., Gupta, M., & Cooke, F. L. (2022). Knowledge hide and seek: role of ethical leadership, self-enhancement and job-involvement. *Journal of Business Research*, *141*, 770-781.

[5] Kivimaa, P., & Rogge, K. S. (2022). Interplay of policy experimentation and institutional change in sustainability transitions: The case of mobility as a service in Finland. *Research Policy*, *51*(1), 104412.

4. Review of Existing Literature

This section reviews major scholarly contributions (2016–2024) relevant to the integration of Tripura into the Indian Union and its political and social implications. Recent research has shifted from purely administrative narratives toward interdisciplinary analyses involving federalism, borderland governance, migration, ethnicity, and identity politics in Northeast India. The works reviewed below provide theoretical and empirical frameworks necessary for understanding Tripura's political transformation.

Sanjib Baruah – *In the Name of the Nation: India and Its Northeast* (2020)

Baruah critically examines the relationship between the Indian state and its northeastern frontier, arguing that national integration in the region has often been framed through security and territorial logic. He highlights how demographic transformation, migration, and centralized governance have shaped identity politics. Although not exclusively focused on Tripura, his analysis of state formation and nationality politics provides a crucial framework for understanding post-merger tensions and tribal mobilization in Tripura.

Louise Tillin – *Indian Federalism* (2016)

Tillin provides a comprehensive study of India's federal structure and the historical processes that shaped it. She argues that integration of princely states must be understood as foundational to India's evolving federal design. Her work contextualizes Tripura's merger within broader constitutional restructuring, showing how frontier states experienced phased integration followed by gradual democratization. The book is essential for analyzing administrative transition and centre–state dynamics.

Duncan McDuie-Ra – *Borderland City in New India: Frontier to Gateway* (2016)

McDuie-Ra's work explores urbanization and political transformation in India's Northeast. His borderland perspective highlights how frontier regions are shaped by migration, militarization, and development narratives. Although centered on other northeastern cities, his theoretical insights into borderland governance and demographic change are directly applicable to Tripura's post-Partition transformation.

Jelle J. P. Wouters and Duncan McDuie-Ra (eds.) – *Northeast India: A Place of Relations* (2017)

This edited volume reinterprets Northeast India not as a peripheral zone but as a space of relational politics shaped by migration, ethnicity, and state power. The contributors emphasize negotiated governance and identity formation. The framework is particularly relevant for understanding Tripura's transition from monarchy to centralized rule and later autonomy negotiations.

Thongkholal Haokip – *India's Look East Policy and the Northeast: Bridging Spaces or Widening Divides?* (2018)

Haokip analyzes the geopolitical importance of Northeast India in national policy frameworks. His study situates northeastern states within strategic and border-security discourses. For Tripura, which shares a long international border with Bangladesh, this work helps contextualize integration within broader security and connectivity concerns.

Niranjan Sahoo – "Federalism and the Integration of the Indian States" (2018)

Sahoo's analysis focuses on the institutional mechanisms that enabled India to absorb princely states into a unified constitutional system. He emphasizes negotiation, administrative pragmatism, and phased governance restructuring. His work provides a modern reassessment of accession and merger processes, offering theoretical clarity on Tripura's integration trajectory.

Samir Kumar Das – *Citizenship, Nationalism and Ethnic Identity: The Politics of Northeast India* **(2018)**

Das examines the interplay between citizenship, migration, and ethnic identity in Northeast India. His analysis of refugee politics and identity assertion offers conceptual tools to understand how demographic shifts in Tripura contributed to political mobilization and debates over representation.

Sudeep Chakravarti – *The Eastern Gate: War and Peace in Nagaland, Manipur and India's Far East* **(2018)**

Although primarily focused on Nagaland and Manipur, Chakravarti provides a journalistic yet analytical exploration of insurgency and state response in the Northeast. His work situates political unrest within historical grievances tied to integration and governance, offering comparative insight relevant to Tripura's insurgency experience.

Uddipana Goswami – *Conflict and Reconciliation: The Politics of Ethnicity in Assam* **(2020 edition)**

Goswami's work examines ethnic assertion and conflict resolution mechanisms in Assam. While geographically centered elsewhere, her exploration of autonomy arrangements and identity politics is useful for analyzing the emergence of tribal autonomy demands in Tripura following demographic shifts.

M. Satish Kumar – "State Formation and Peripheral Politics in Northeast India" (2022, *Journal of Asian Studies***)**

Kumar analyzes how peripheral states in Northeast India negotiated integration and democratization. He argues that political consolidation in frontier regions was often accompanied by uneven representation and contestation. His framework strengthens the understanding of Tripura's administrative transition and evolving federal negotiations.

5. Critical Analysis

A critical evaluation of Tripura's integration into the Indian Union (1947–1949) shows that the merger was neither a purely "smooth administrative event" nor an entirely "coercive takeover." Instead, it was a negotiated settlement shaped by three intersecting pressures: the constitutional framework of Indian nation-building, Tripura's acute borderland vulnerability after Partition, and the internal administrative limitations of a princely regime facing refugee-driven demographic upheaval. In this sense, Tripura's integration can be read as a pragmatic political choice—one that helped secure territorial stability and opened the path toward democratic governance, yet simultaneously created long-term fault lines around identity, land, and representation. One of the most visible strengths of integration was the rapid consolidation of sovereignty in a strategically sensitive region. Surrounded on three sides by East Pakistan, Tripura could not realistically sustain external relations or defense as an independent monarchy. The accession and subsequent merger brought the state into India's security architecture and administrative umbrella, reducing the risk of political isolation and external interference. Menon's account of integration policy underscores the central objective of preventing fragmented sovereignties from weakening the new Union, and Tripura fits squarely into that rationale (Menon 73–110). However, a limitation of this "security-first" logic is that it often prioritized territorial consolidation over careful accommodation of local socio-ethnic realities.

Politically, integration undeniably enabled a transition from hereditary authority to constitutional governance, but the trajectory was phased and centrally managed. Tripura's shift from princely rule to a Chief Commissioner's province reflected India's preference for stabilizing administration first and democratizing gradually. This administrative transition later contributed to representative institutions and

eventual statehood (1972), reinforcing the broader nation-building[6] narrative described by Guha (Guha 44–52). Yet the same process also meant that early governance was highly centralized, with decision-making power concentrated at the Centre during the formative post-merger years. In frontier regions, such centralization can generate a perception that integration is an "external" project rather than a locally owned transformation an issue that becomes more visible when examining tribal political responses in later decades. The most enduring critical issue is the demographic transformation triggered by Partition and refugee settlement, which interacted with integration to reshape political power. While refugee rehabilitation[7] was a humanitarian and national imperative, its scale in Tripura altered the population balance, reducing indigenous tribes from majority to minority status over time. This shift had direct implications for political representation, language dominance, and resource competition. Baruah's analysis of nationality politics in Northeast India helps interpret this pattern: when demographic change coincides with centralized state formation, identity-based mobilization becomes a likely outcome (Baruah 201–15). In Tripura, the political "success" of integration at the national level thus carried social costs at the regional level, especially for communities whose land and customary systems faced disruption.

A related critique concerns land alienation and the disruption of customary governance. Ethnographic and sociological studies of Tripura's tribal communities emphasize that land is not merely economic property but also tied to kinship, identity, and cultural continuity (Roy 112–30). When post-Partition settlement expanded into rural and forest-adjacent areas, tribal grievances intensified—not necessarily because integration introduced the problem, but because integration institutionalized new legal-administrative regimes that could override customary arrangements. Bhattacharjee's work on ethnicity and insurgency across the Northeast shows how such grievances, when prolonged and politicized, can feed militancy and cycles of counter-insurgency (Bhattacharjee 148–70). Tripura's later insurgency dynamics therefore cannot be separated from the integration-era demographic and administrative restructuring.

At the same time, it would be reductive to treat integration only as a source of conflict. Integration also provided Tripura with constitutional rights, expanded educational infrastructure, and broader development pathways unavailable under a financially strained princely structure. Economic and administrative modernization after merger—roads, institutions, welfare expansion—created new opportunities, even if benefits were unevenly distributed (Chakraborty 95–112). The critical question, therefore, is not whether integration "benefited Tripura" in general, but *who benefited more, when, and under what policy arrangements*. Scholarship like Roy Burman's profile of Tripura suggests that modernization and marginalization often advanced together: development indicators rose, but identity and resource conflicts deepened because the distributive and cultural politics of development were not equally negotiated (Roy Burman 55–78).

A further critical point is the tension between national integration and regional autonomy. Tripura's later institutional mechanisms for tribal self-governance especially autonomy provisions can be seen as corrective responses to earlier phases of centralized integration. In the broader Northeast, autonomy framework's function both as conflict-management tools and as recognition of distinct historical-political identities (Baruah 201–15). This implies that Tripura's integration was not a "finished event" in 1949; it was the start of an evolving renegotiation between the Union and local communities over power-sharing, cultural protection, and administrative legitimacy.

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[6] Dhiman, B. (2023). Enhancing positivity in mass media for nation building: A critical review. MISC.

[7] Tofani, M., Iorio, S., Berardi, A., Galeoto, G., Conte, A., Fabbrini, G., ... & Marceca, M. (2023). Disability, rehabilitation, and assistive technologies for refugees and asylum seekers in Italy: Policies and challenges. *Societies*, *13*(3), 63.

6. Conclusion

The integration of Tripura into the Indian Union in 1949 was a decisive step in consolidating India's territorial unity and strengthening its northeastern frontier. The transition from princely rule to constitutional democracy enabled political modernization, administrative restructuring, and eventual statehood. However, the process was shaped by complex demographic changes following Partition, which significantly altered social and ethnic dynamics within the state. While integration brought security, development, and democratic participation, it also generated challenges related to identity, land rights, and representation, particularly for indigenous tribal communities. Overall, Tripura's experience reflects both the achievements and complexities of post-independence nation-building, demonstrating that political integration must be accompanied by inclusive and balanced social policies to ensure long-term stability and harmony.

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