

An Introduction to the North East

Tucked away in the North-eastern region of India is a landmass of 2,62,500 square kilometers comprising 'The Seven Sisters', namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and the recent addition Sikkim, which became an Indian protectorate in 1947 and a full fledged state in 1975. They all have been lumped in a single basket called 'The North East' which mirrors the unfamiliarity of the nation with its diversity and complexity of issues seeking redress. Abundant with natural resources, culture and tradition, it is home to almost about 400 varied ethnic groups. Perhaps nowhere else in the world is there a parallel for the kind of ethnic, linguistic and socio-cultural diversity that exists within a relatively small space in the North Eastern region of India. They are connected to mainstream India through a narrow corridor in North Bengal, with an approximate width of a mere 33 kilometer on the eastern side and 21 kilometer on the western side. This stretch of land is called 'The Chicken's Neck' or 'The Silliguri Corridor' and the remaining 90 per cent (2, 36,250 square kilometer) is bordered by international territory, which has isolated it from the rest of the country.

At the time of independence North-East India was a conglomeration of two valleys, Brahmaputra and Barak, where most people lived and the tribal groups in the numerous surrounding hill areas. Even within this tiny region there was little contact among themselves and they knew very little about each other. They were never a part of any great Indian Empire and were stumbled upon only accidentally during the British annexation. The British granted relative autonomy to this region, with very little governance and prohibition of entry to persons without permits in return for non interference with their business interests in oil, tea, coal and timber. The Constitution of India, did not exclude the North-east in such a manner, but specified them in part A & B under the Sixth Schedule, with similar restrictions. Many of the areas within Part A graduated to statehood, while those in Part B were administered by the Government of Assam. Given its ethnic diversity, integration with mainstream India was considered to be a delicate issue, giving the tribal groups space and time to come to terms with the political and social realities. This autonomy failed to serve its purpose and created havoc for the North-east at time of partition in 1947, when they became virtually landlocked, surrounded by inhospitable neighbours. Traditional trade routes- rail, road

and air became inaccessible or long drawn like the Chittagong and Calcutta ports. Such historical economics has been the main reason for the North-east lagging behind in development.

The North-eastern states are plagued by sluggish economic growth, under development, subdued economic activities, non development expenditures overshooting revenue collections, limited tax bases, low investment and capital formation, low purchasing power, scanty marketing linkages and openings for finished products, infrastructural deficits, transportation bottlenecks, high production costs, poor credit deposit ratio (CDR) of banks, processing and storage deficits, turbulent internal scenario, inhospitable rugged terrains, geographical remoteness and poor connectivity with the mainland.

This region has yet to strike a chord of oneness with the rest of India, and identify with the broader identity of the nation. Since the morrow of independence there has been a cry of separation in the North-east with slogans like, 'Indian's quit Naga Hills' followed by demands for a 'Sovereign Assam'. In spite of living in close proximity for 40 years with Bangladeshi refugees-the Chakmas and Hajongs, Arunachalis still insist on flushing them out. As a result seemingly interminable turmoil has engulfed this region, both a cause and result of the lagging development. There has been progress in recent years following Government efforts, but still insufficient to make a significant difference as most decision makers at the centre look for 'Quick Solutions' without making an effort to examine the source of most problems.

A sizeable amount of funds are allotted to development of the region, but utilization of the same is inefficient due to lack of trained professionals and other leakages like corruption.

Removal of infrastructure bottlenecks, provision of basic minimum services, creating a conducive environment for private investment and development of human resources are priority issues. Involvement of the people from the region itself at a grass root level will provide a lasting solution and self-sustained growth. It will also offer an alternative avenue to channel the energy of the youth, which is currently being misdirected by the insurgents within the region. The insurgent groups too, need to be brought back to the national mainstream and involved in developmental activities through rehabilitation plans.