



**North Eastern Region of India – Personal
Reflections on Human Well-Being**

Chapter 1

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Historically, North Eastern Region of India or NER, has been prosperous and resource rich region. Today when this region is compared with the rest of India, it is witnessed that the region had much slower growth. It is due to several problems that the region has not been able to keep pace with the rest of the country. The lack of committed political will has been one of the very important reasons for slower growth. But in last few years it is witnessed that the region has been in limelight for several positive reasons and changes. The central government is showing keen interest in developing the region and capitalising on available resources to the

¹ I have lived in the North East of India for more than two decades, working in Bhutan for around 9 years and at NEHU Shillong for around 13 years. Having travelled widely to all major towns of all the states of the NER and interacted with students, academicians, social workers, and policy makers, I developed my own perspective for developing this region. This piece is dedicated to my years spent in this wonderful land which gave me life lessons and drove me to think beyond economic parameters.

advantage of the people of the region. Though the region constitutes around 4% of the country's population (around 3.5% of India's total agriculture land holding), it occupies around 8% of the country's area, putting the region in an advantageous position. The literacy rate in the region is better than the national average and the infant mortality rate is lower as compared to the rest of the nation. The child sex ratio is much better across states in the region as compared to national ratio. It is estimated that in Tripura, and Mizoram there are more female children than males. Across types of educational institutions from primary schools to the universities the region's share is 7% (as against 4% population). These are some indications of the position and potential of the region concerning general social parameters. Though a look at the per capita income of the region speaks of better conditions as compared to the country however there is inequality, poverty, and perceptual backwardness.

Assam (68%) is the most populated state in the region and Sikkim (1.3%), the least populated state. Arunachal is least dense whereas Assam is most densely populated state. In general, the region is not as dense as the country. The region is dominated by people belonging to different indigenous tribes of colour and clan, beliefs, and practices. Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Meghalaya could be called as tribal states as they have dominating share of tribal population. The unique character of this region is driven by the fact that these tribes have very exclusive approach within their community. Though they might not have high aspirations yet they have strong value system to support each other and patronize their brethren. Generally, they seem to be contented with what they have and their sense of belonging to their family, tribe and community is found to be very strong.

Some 25 years back the Planning Commission of India submitted a High Level Commission Report to the Prime Minister entitled *Transforming the North East* – tackling backlogs in Basic Minimum Services and Infrastructural Needs. This report was to suggest measures for the assurance of basic minimum services and facilitating

physical infrastructure in the seven states² of the NER. The report mentioned – “The Northeast has vast potential resources but little or no "plan" resources to-day. It is heavily indebted in spite of high per capita plan outlays and subventions. Huge establishment costs exceed state revenue collections as government service provides the sole and certainly the principal avenue of employment. This situation cannot be abruptly ended without creating viable alternatives. The paradox is that there is an enormous amount of work to be done but few jobs. Likewise, there have been grievous leakages, partly to underground extortion and "taxation" but also as a result of the breakdown of traditional values and institutions, the bewilderingly rapid changeover from a barter to a monetised economy, and the rise of new elites.”³ This report highlighted four important deficits for the region – a basic need deficit, an infrastructural deficit, a resource deficit, and important of all, a two-way deficit of understanding with the rest of the country compounding the others. Baruah (2005) identified four gaps that have disturbed the relationship between the NER and so-called mainland India, viz., cultural gap, economic gap, psychological gap, and emotional gap⁴.

Keeping the context and qualities in mind I shall like to suggest measures for the cause of improving human well-being of the residents of the region.

Agriculture and Rural Development

Most part of the region is rural in its setting as more than 4/5th population lives in villages. They are into sustenance farming. The region was neglected by the British when it comes to focusing on agriculture. Singh (1987) states – “The modernization of traditional agriculture demanded the raising of crops on all

² In 1997 when this report was submitted, Sikkim was not part of the North East Region. It was included in the region in the year 2002.

³ Planning Commission. (1997, March). Transforming the Northeast – tackling backlogs in basic minimum services and infrastructural needs. High Level Commission Report to the Prime Minister. Government of India. New Delhi.

⁴ Baruah, Sanjib. (2005). A new Politics of Race: India and its North-east. *India International Centre Quarterly*. 32 (2/3). 163-176.

cultivable but fallow land, reclamation of marshy or swampy lands, and introduction of new crops of vegetables, mustard seeds and jute. This required investment in irrigation, flood control measures etc. But the British did not want to pay for it. They were on the lookout for cheap and dependable human labour which was not available locally. This led the British to introduce Bengali Muslim cultivators from East Bengal who were willing to move out of their habitat due to pressures on land in their area. The discovery of tea in Assam led to a further introduction of tribal labour to Assam in large numbers from Chotanagpur and Orissa' (p 261)⁵. If we look back, we find it a blessing in disguise. The land is pure and fertile having huge potential of growing grains, vegetables, fruits, tea, spices, herbal and other horticultural products.

Interestingly there is quite a balance between size of the population (3.78% of India) of the region and the agricultural land holding (3.37% of India) speaking of the potential available in the region. Assam being the big brother of the region suffers badly by regular occurrence of flood which impacts the life line of the residents. Though with the use of modern technology and better resource management it has become manageable, yet there should be some pathbreaking steps that can reduce the impact and help the affected people deal with it easily.

There is rural migration and as the children go out for study in the institutions of importance elsewhere, they also shift to urban centres for the want of lack of opportunities in the rural areas. I get reminded of the PURA initiative that former Indian president Shri Abdul Kalam always emphasized on. Providing Urban amenities to Rural Areas through building supporting infrastructure and

⁵ Singh, B.P. (1987). North-East India: Demography, Culture and Identity Crisis. *Modern Asian Studies*. 21(2). 257-282

industry for provision of better life conditions and appropriate job opportunities. There seem to be huge scope in horticulture and floriculture sector that educated people can go for and build networks with the other parts of the world which can help them in seeking markets. More than half of the tea production and around a quarter share of the silk production in the country comes from this region. There have been setbacks to tea cultivation and marketing in the region which should be handled properly. Assam tea has earned a name in the tea market across globe and it can not be left unattended. Silk from the region has already made a mark among silk lovers. The entrepreneurs have started finding greater markets through online mode and it is helping the region in boosting growth.

Border Trade Management

The region shares more than 5 thousand kms of its border with neighbouring countries like China, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. We have moved from Look East to Act East Policy whereby building necessary ties not just with the adjacent neighbours but with other eastern countries. These countries are trade partners with India and could be connected through roads for building effective supply chain. Apart from organized trade through agreements and formal structure, there is informal trade across borders with Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. The border *haats* are organised regularly, helping the adjacent villages for buying and selling of their produce. However, it is important to mention that there is a challenge for infiltration of people from Bangladesh. The laws have been made stringent to deal with the inflow of illegal migrants.

It is important to build healthy diplomatic ties so that surface transport facilities can be developed to transport goods to and from Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand. It shall help build friendly relationship with the neighbours and provide opportunities for mutual learning. There is ample scope for textiles, pharama products, livestock, and fisheries to explore and expand market opportunities through borders.

Talent Management

India is a young country and so is the NER. There is a need for a policy targeting youth of this region. There is strong need to tap young energy and to provide them opportunity to pursue their dreams. Apart from focusing on education, employment opportunities, and skill-based learning, it would be better if a culture of entrepreneurship is built so that the youth are able to explore different kind of markets and are able to respond through product development, innovation, and creativity. Their exposure to technological advances and its use in designing better products can help them visualise better future.

The region has strong potential for sports, performing arts, creative writing etc. This requires proper guidance and environment at all levels so that their energy is streamlined accordingly. Mary Kom and Mirabai Chanu, Bhaichang Bhutia and Kothajit Singh, Loveleena and Sarita Devi are some such names who have become household names. Their achievements have become motivating force to many from the region, they need to be trained, skilled and guided appropriately. Sports inculcate a sense of togetherness, teamwork and positivity. Sports academies should be developed in each state and young talent should be identified and mentored. Though Sports Authority of India

have taken many initiatives to build and encourage sports culture yet a lot needs to be done in this direction. Music and performing art is another area which requires attention of concerned authorities for providing platform to the talented individuals and clubs to perform and to interact with the people from other regions.

Managing Poverty and inequality

Poverty and inequality are major socio-economic problems of the region. The gap between rich and the poor is wide. Though in last decade poverty statistics has improved yet it requires attention and action. It requires micro management through government agencies as well as through a network of non-government organizations. The business entities should share the burden of the state through profit sharing and helping the society through empowering them. The refineries in Assam have helped the governments in many ways by building roads, schools, hospitals, and other infrastructure. Similarly private business organizations should also play responsibly. Populist culture of freebies should not be encouraged otherwise it makes people lazy and complacent. Young people living below poverty line should be counselled to take up small jobs and earn their living for which appropriate measures for their orientation and training should be taken. I feel that in order to deal with poverty we cannot have policy at the larger level, however it should be handled at the local level. Local government has more important a role in eradicating poverty rather than the policy from the top. Poverty eradication is a slow process that can only happen when at least the needy get a square meal. There should be provisions for meeting the need of the poor by providing them ration against work. These people should be engaged in some meaningful work that they develop a sense of earning their living.

Encouraging Industry, ICT and Entrepreneurship

NER has huge potential to become technology hub for the whole country. The use of information technology has reduced the distances and redefined work spaces. The youth of the region speak relatively better English as compared to their counterparts from rest of the country. This talent can be tapped positively by engaging them in providing back-end services to the large corporate houses. There have been initiatives by the government to identify special economic zones across the region but somehow it has not helped as much as expected. I think there should be identification of product or service at local level which can be focused by the state, district, or the village. The people should be engaged in the process of decision making and instead of top-down approach, bottom-up approach should be preferred. The nature of industry should meet local needs in terms of raw material requirement, skill-set required, and logistics apart from translating its benefit to the local population. The residents should be convinced that the industry is in their interest and for their well-being. With the arrival and establishment of the industries comes the socio-economic development of the place. It creates better job opportunities and provides market avenues to fulfil demand of industrial workers. Not to mention it boosts physical infrastructure as well.

The use of information and communication technology bridges gap between buyer and seller as well as between customer and the service provider. The region has a challenge in assuring seamless provisions of ICT in the region which has potential to transform the region. Though there are few entrepreneurs who have launched their businesses from Mizoram, Arunachal, and Meghalaya yet a lot needs to be done in order to build and strengthen startup ecosystem. I hope with the reforms in the education sector,

entrepreneurship would attract many students and make them job provider rather than being job seeker. There has to be proper system of mentoring and incubation within schools and colleges for being an active partner in this journey.

Positive Politics and Public Policy

Politics and public policy create the destiny of a state. How well the resources are managed depends on the political priorities leading towards supportive public policy. The political determination to look after the welfare of the people and assuring their well-being designs the future of any state. Much of the problems of the region are due to poor political will to resolve the issues. Political problems need political solutions. It is interesting to note that social problems could be solved by political solutions, however political problems may not be resolved through social solutions. Positive politics stems from the belief of the call to assure the improvement in the well-being of the people through effective public policy initiatives whether they are concerning education at all levels, health for all sections of society, promising effective governance, strengthening social cohesion, and nurturing sense of gratitude among the citizens.

All the states in the region have appropriate number of universities, yet they need more colleges and senior secondary schools especially in the remote areas. The quality of all the institutions needs a big boost through zero tolerance to political interference. The major challenge for the education policy makers is to control drop out ratio in schools. It could be done through creating awareness about the importance of education in the lives of the people on one side and about ill treatment of illiterates by others on the other side. It is

witnessed that the health parameters have improved in last decade. There are lot of infrastructural changes happening in the health sector throughout the region so that the residents do not need to travel far for seeking required medical assistance. Centrally funded hospitals are getting constructed across the region. However, the major challenge shall lie to man these hospitals by efficient medical doctors and staff. This has been one of the key issues even for already operating hospitals.

The citizens should have trust in their elected government which in turn looks after the interests of its citizens. The challenge for the region is to follow the principles of positive politics and design effective public policies that contributes to build better India.

Apart from above mentioned focus areas the region seems to have huge potential in the area of tourism. It is witnessed that the inflow of tourists from other parts of the country to this region has improved many folds yet much is required to be done to attract the tourists through better physical infrastructure at the tourist destinations, travel routes and transit locations. Though road and air connectivity has improved yet it still needs to be prioritised in the policy framework as it is done at other tourist destinations of importance. The Sikkim experiment of tourism could be followed by other states in the region which could help improve perception of the visitors about the whole region.

If we look back to 1997 when the Planning Commission's report mentioned four important deficits (basic need, infrastructure, resource, and understanding or perception) and compare it with the conditions prevalent today, one could easily appreciate that most of these deficits have been handled successfully. If we analyse the growth and development parameters along with perception of people living in rest of the country as well as residing in the NER about the progress in the region, we may

clearly observe that last 10 years have made huge progress as compared to the earlier 15 years period. It is in this context that different policies of the central government command appreciation. The physical infrastructure of the region has improved phenomenally which is the result of allocation of ample resources both financial as well as political. North East Region is no more a neglected or ignored land and finds priority for building institutions and infrastructure by all government agencies. There are initiatives to create awareness about the cultural values and beliefs of the people of NER apart from recognizing their talent at different forums. The land of agitations and bands, terrorism and extortion is heading towards growth and development, peace and prosperity. The gaps (cultural, economic, psychological, and emotional) as identified by Baruah (2005) are getting bridged through political determination to resolve issues and to win the confidence of the people.

India shall be completing 100 years of its independence in 2047. In this light next twenty five years would be the challenging years for all of us. We shall need proper management of resources so that all parts of the country and all spheres of policy are directed towards making India prosperous, peaceful, and happy. I wish when we complete this journey, we do not have a single person sleeping without a square meal, we do not have people dying out of non-curable disease, we do not have a single person who is not engaged in meaningful employment. That India I dream of.