

Inclusive Growth in the North East

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North Eastern Region of India, commonly known as North East, consists of eight states namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura and its geographical area is 2,62,179 square kilometers. This area is smaller than the geographical area of some big states of India like Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. North East is connected to the rest of the country through a narrow corridor, generally called the chicken neck, near Siliguri region. North East is surrounded by five foreign countries. These are Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Nepal and Myanmar. Only about thirty to thirty five percent of the area of North East is plain land, mostly in three valleys namely the Brahmaputra, the Barak and the Imphal Valleys. The rest of the area is hilly land. About three-fourth of the area of North East are yet to be brought under cadastral survey. For the vast unsurveyed areas no proper and authenticated land records are available to show individual title over land.

Compared to the area of the North East its population has apparently increased abnormally from the beginning of the last century. The population of North East was only about 44 lakhs when the population of the then India of 1901 was more

than 29 crores. In 2011 the population of North East has increased to 450 lakhs and that of 'India of 1901' has increased to about 15600 lakh or 156 crore (India 121 cr. plus Pakistan 18 cr. plus Bangladesh 17 cr.) This shows that between 1901 to 2011 when the population of India of 1901 has increased by about 5.4 times the population of North East has increased by more than ten times. Continuous migration from surrounding areas has increased the population of the North East in such a way that the average size of land holding in the region is only about one hectare.

The picture of the North East will not be complete if something is not said about the very high rainfall and presence of one of the biggest rivers of the world namely the Brahmaputra and its major tributaries numbering more than seventy in North East. The average annual rainfall in North east is more than two thousand five hundred millimeters. Compared to the size of the Brahmaputra river, the valley is very narrow. Very high rainfall, big size of the river basins (the Brahmaputra and the Barak) and narrow valleys are regularly causing severe floods, erosion, landslides and sand deposition in the North East causing loss of huge areas of valuable agricultural land and reduction of the average size of land holdings in the region.

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It is stated that since the great earthquake (of intensity of 8.5 in Richter Scale) of 1950 in Assam, flood and erosion have increased in the state and till date about five to six thousand square kilometers of land have been lost due to erosion by rivers. This has made lakhs of people landless and homeless in the state. Rehabilitation of erosion and landslide affected landless people of North East and bringing erosion within the definition of natural calamity in State Disaster Response Funds' guidelines for paying compensation, are urgently required in this region.

Despite these natural and manmade (migration) challenges the economic condition of the North East was almost at par with the rest of the country at the time of the country's partition. But from 1947 the following major historic events have changed North East dramatically and retarded its development in many sectors. These events are-

a) Partition of the country - When the major road, rail and river routes connecting North East to the rest of the country suddenly got snapped.

- b) The Chinese aggression of 1962 - When the Chinese army entered Arunachal Pradesh (called NEFA at that time) and returned of their own. This apparently created a feeling in the minds of some private investors, whether rightly or wrongly, that large scale investment in North East should wait for some time.
- c) The Bangladesh Liberation war of 1971 - When crores of people from Bangladesh entered some states of North East as refugees. Though most of the refugees returned to Bangladesh it appears that large scale demographic change was noticed in some of the states of North East bordering Bangladesh. From the end of the seventies of the last century problems of insurgency started in states like Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Manipur. Insurgency affected the present day Nagaland and Mizoram in the fifties and sixties of the last century. Now, of course, due to various actions taken by the Central and State governments insurgency in the

region is no longer a matter of great concern.

Proper rehabilitation of thousands of immigrants who have surrendered to the authorities during the last almost four decades is also very important for the North East Region.

Though the indigenous population of the North East may be less than about three crores, there are more than one hundred such groups, the populations of many of which are less than twenty thousand per group. Many such small ethnic groups stare at marginalization.

In addition to the aforesaid natural and historical challenges some other major challenges of North East are the following-

- a) Low agricultural productivity (about 2000 kg rice per hectare) Rice (paddy) is the main crop of the region.
- b) Low cropping intensity (about 1.5)
- c) Low coverage of irrigation.
- d) Low application of chemical fertilizers.

- e) Low credit flow from banks. Credit deposit ratio is less than fifty percent in the North East.
- f) Inadequate availability of certified seeds and good quality planting materials throughout the region, throughout the year, for all the farmers.
- g) Inadequate facilities for godowns, warehouses and cold storage etc.
- h) Absence of modern well equipped markets or mandis in the region, except in some few places.
- i) Very low per capita consumption of power compared to the national average.
- j) Very low use of power for irrigation.
- k) Non-availability of ores of industrially useful metals like iron, aluminum, copper, zinc, tin, lead and nickel etc; and substances like mica and sulfur etc.
- l) Non-availability of big reserve of good quality coal. Coal present in the North East often contains high percentage of sulfur which makes it unfit for use in industry.
- m) Inadequate number of polytechnics and higher institutions for engineering, medical and nursing studies etc.
- n) Teachers' Training in the whole of North East is another issue which needs immediate attention



for overall improvement of the general standard of education in the region. Special steps are also necessary for improving the standard of teaching mathematics and science in schools of the North East.

- o) Absence of big industries except four oil refineries and two petrochemical complexes.

Of course, in the state of Assam and North East there have been rail lines, tea gardens and oil and rice mills set up from the beginning of the last century. In the last few decades in the whole of North East, there has been remarkable improvement in road,

rail and air connectivity and in the field of telecommunication. There are now many new universities, medical colleges and engineering colleges in the region established in the last two decades. There is now also one IIT and one IIM in the North East.

The average per capita annual income of the region is about seventy per cent of the national average. The literacy rate (74.48) of the region is at par with the national rate (74.04)

North East is comparatively backward even after seven decades of independence mostly due to the aforesaid challenges. In the absence of large scale manufacturing industrial base, the future of the region depends primarily on developing the following sectors-

- a) Agriculture including horticulture and floriculture;
- b) Dairy farming;
- c) Goat rearing;
- d) Piggery;
- e) Poultry;
- f) Duckery;
- g) Fishery;
- h) Food and meat processing;
- i) Tourism;
- j) Sericulture and weaving and





handloom and textiles through increasing production of yarns and improving designs of garments;

- k) Production of organic tea, organic food, mushroom and honey;
- l) Production of plastic goods from high and low density polyethylene manufactured in Brahmaputra Cracker and Polymers Ltd. at Dibrugarh;
- m) Setting up small and medium scale industries based on huge quantities of bamboo, cane, jute, paddy husk and medicinal plants;
- n) Developing industries for quality improvement and packaging of locally available ginger and turmeric;
- o) Utilizing the huge amount of water available in local rivers and streams for generating hydel power and arranging irrigation facilities;
- p) Setting up industries for making garments, pharmaceuticals, paper and sugar etc. (Due to high rainfall and moisture content in the soil, North East seems highly suitable for large scale production of sugarcane, pulses, oil seeds and costly flowers like orchids);
- q) Setting up sufficient number of polytechnics and institutions for nursing, paramedics, pharmacy, repairing transformers and items like television, air conditioners,

computers, washing machines, motor vehicles and refrigerator etc.

North East is very rich in culture; and there is great talent among the youth of the region in music, dancing and painting etc. If sufficient numbers of schools are set up in the region for teaching singing, dancing and playing various musical instruments, then a large number of youngsters are likely to get employment in these fields.

If large scale investment is arranged in the above sectors and cropping intensity in the region is increased to 2 or 2.5 there will be sufficient employment opportunities for the local people in the region. The number of bank branches and credit-deposit ratio also has to be increased in the region. There is also urgent need for improving tele connectivity in the region for bringing about complete financial and digital inclusion of the people of North East.

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prosperous. Connecting the aforesaid countries with North East through roadways, rail lines, riverways and airs will automatically increase the flow of men, materials, technology and ideas from and to the North East. For the people of the aforesaid countries, arrangements can be made in the North East for religious, ecological, adventure and medical tourism. This will also improve cultural and academic relations among the people of the North East and the surrounding areas including the neighboring countries mentioned earlier.

To ensure fair and equitable distribution of the fruits of development to all concerned, special and immediate steps are necessary for the various small indigenous ethnic groups of the North East. It has already been reported in the media that languages of eleven ethnic groups of the North East are staring at extinction as each of these languages are spoken by less than ten thousand people. It has to be specially ensured that the process of development does not by-pass the small and marginalized ethnic groups of the region.

The pollution free atmosphere of the North East and the large number of youths who are very fluent in English can make the policy makers go a big way for setting up electronic industries and BPOs in the region.

To solve the acute unemployment problem in the region there should be special drives for increasing the intake of North East youth in railways, nationalized banks, central paramilitary forces including Assam rifles, airlines, oil refineries and other big central public sector undertakings.

Finally, to provide incentives to all the people of North East in developing agriculture, industry and business, immediate steps are necessary for land reform including cadastral survey of non-forest un-surveyed areas, preparation of land records and giving of ownership right of land to all eligible people as per provisions of relevant land laws. □

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