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MEGHALAYA: SWITZERLAND OF THE EAST?

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ABSTRACT

North Eastern Region comprises of seven states which is popularly known as seven sisters and in 2001 the eighth State "Sikkim" had been included in the North Eastern Region. These states are viz., Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura covering 263,179 sq km which is about 8% of the total geographical area of the country. The region is one of the landlocked regions of South Asia. About 4500 km i.e. 98% of its border is with five different countries of South Asia—Nepal, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh. The economy of the region primarily depends on agricultural sector contributing over 40 per cent of the income and employ about 70 per cent of the total working population. Only Assam, and to some extent Meghalaya, have moved ahead of the rest of the states in terms of industrial development whose industrialization is centered on tea, oil and timber. In the absence of major industrial establishment and other employment opportunities in the region unemployment rate, particularly urban educated youths, is not only high but also increasing rapidly. This is a research paper based on descriptive research design which tries to focus more closely on global competitive challenges faced by North-Eastern Region of India and the Vision which India dreamt of becoming by the next decade (Vision 2020). Literature review of secondary data available from reliable and valid sources were used in conducting this study.

KEYWORDS

landlocked, industrial, employment, Vision 2020.

INTRODUCTION

An overall scenario of the North East India in the post globalization period is not very impressive compared to other regions of India. This may be attributed to the prevailing geo-political condition in the region and attitude of the central government in tackling the issues of the region. Being one of the most neglected regions of the Indian union, the overall state of affairs in the region is quite alarming. The unattended issues and problems of the past are being accumulated, multi-layered and have become multifarious. Over and above, the mounting pressures of emerging challenges of rapid transformation in business environment need to be countered. Infrastructure like roads play a very important role in the economic development of a region. Transport and communication in the region remained grossly underdeveloped for centuries.

Every country needs a vision statement which stirs the imagination and motivates all segments of society to greater effort. It is an essential step in building a political consensus on a broad national development strategy, which encompasses, inter-alia, the roles and responsibilities of different agents in the economy, such as Central, State and local government, the private corporate sector, the small and tiny sector, people's organizations etc. It must identify the potential risks and bottlenecks and their possible solutions in order to mobilize efforts in a focused manner. It is clear, therefore, that to meet these objectives, a vision statement has to operate at several levels of generality and specificity.

In order to address these issues, among others, the Planning Commission constituted a Committee on Vision 2020 for India in June 2000 under the chairmanship of Dr. S.P. Gupta, Member, Planning Commission. This initiative brought together over 30 experts from different fields. Their deliberations, extending over a period of more than two years, had helped to throw up a range of interesting possibilities, critical issues and crucial decision-points for government and private bodies for future action.

The Report of the Committee examined many important issues, but the ones that stood out most powerfully were employment and education. In order to ensure access to food and other essentials of a healthy life for all citizens, India faces the challenge of generating 200 million new employment opportunities over the next two decades. This report called for raising employment generation to the top of the nation's development agenda and marshalling all available resources to create employment opportunities for all job-seekers. It went even further by identifying the sectors which offer the greatest potential for job creation as well as critical policy issues that need to be addressed in order to fully tap that potential.

Education was the second main thrust area of this document. Greater coverage and better quality education at all levels from basic literacy to hi-tech science and technology is the essential prerequisite for raising agricultural productivity and industrial quality, spurring growth of India's budding IT and biotechnology sectors, stimulating growth of manufactured and service exports, improving health and nutrition, domestic stability and quality of governance. The report called for concerted efforts to abolish illiteracy, achieve 100 per cent enrolment at primary and secondary levels, and broaden access to higher education and vocational training through both traditional and non-traditional delivery systems.

The document also examined issues related to population growth, food production, health, vulnerable sections of the population, transport, communication, energy self-sufficiency, water conservation and air quality, trade investment, peace, security and governance. It gave projections of India in 2020 in business as usual and in the best case scenario in various important sectors and also identified nodal points of Indian prosperity. Its central conclusion was that India has the opportunity to emerge as one of the world's leading economies over the next two decades, provided her citizens have the self-confidence, the self-reliance, the will and the determination to realize their individual and collective potentials.

Our vision of India in 2020 is of a nation bustling with energy, entrepreneurship and innovation.

The country's people will be better fed, dressed and housed, taller and healthier, more educated and longer living than any generation in the country's long history. India will be much more integrated with the global economy and will be a major player in terms of trade, technology and investment. Rising levels of education, employment and incomes will help stabilize India's internal security and social environment. A united and prosperous India will be far less vulnerable to external security threats. A more prosperous India in 2020 will be characterized by a better educated electorate and more transparent, accountable, efficient and decentralized government.

ENGINES OF ECONOMIC GROWTH OF INDIA

- Educational levels are rising rapidly.
- Rates of technological innovation and application are accelerating.
- Cheaper and faster communication is dissolving physical and social barriers, both within the country and internationally.
- Information is being made available in greater quantity and quality than ever before.
- Globalization is opening up new markets.

MAJOR CHALLENGES FOR INDIA

- A targeted approach to bring millions of families above the poverty line.
- Generation of nearly ten millions of new employment opportunities per annum, especially for those in the lower income groups.

- Eradication of illiteracy.
- A concerted effort to raise primary and secondary enrolment rates and minimize dropouts.
- Improved public health to reduce infant mortality and child malnutrition.
- Massive investment in power generation, telecommunications and other physical and social infrastructure.
- Accelerated acquisition of technology capabilities to raise productivity in agriculture, industry and services.
- Becoming a more important player in the world economy in terms of both trade and investments

After the turn of a decade in this century, it is an appropriate time for reflecting on the unfinished tasks of nation-building and the country's future possibilities, and placing the present Eleventh Plan in tune with a Vision document. This document provides a framework and perspective for those in government and the private sector who are tasked with formulating initiatives for national prosperity.

RURAL DEVELOPMENT OF NORTH EAST INDIA: ELEVENTH FIVE YEAR PLAN

"Inclusive Growth" is both the title and the overarching goal of the Eleventh Five Year Plan. The key component of the "strategy of inclusive growth" must be inclusive governance as the means of empowering the disadvantaged with the aim of enabling them to overcome their poverty. It is the effective empowerment of the disadvantaged through the effective devolution of Functions, Finances and Functionaries to representative institutions of local self-government such as Panchayats and Village Councils, Village Development Boards and similar such institutions elsewhere, on the principle of subsidiarity, which states that anything which can be done at a lower level should be done at that very level. This will pave the way to the effective implementation of other measures of inclusive growth such as:

- stepping up investment in rural areas, in rural infrastructure and agriculture;
- increased credit availability, particularly to farmers and others, and offering them remunerative prices for their crops;
- increased rural employment, including the provision of a unique social safety net in the shape of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Programmes;
- increased public spending on education and health care, including strengthening the mid-day meal programme and offering scholarships to the needy;
- investment in urban renewal, improving the quality of life for the urban poor;
- empowering the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, minorities, women and children socially, economically and educationally; and
- Ensuring that, through public investment, the growth process spreads to backward regions and districts of our country.
- Ensuring that, through public investment, the growth process spreads to backward regions and districts of the North Eastern Region.
- It is important that Panchayat Raj be brought centre-stage as the principal governance reform to reinforce economic reform in such a manner as to secure inclusive growth.
- Gram Sabhas to be made functional and all elected representatives at the grass-roots level involved to enable equitable access to rural development and welfare schemes.
- In keeping with the federal structure of India, the North Eastern states should be given flexibility to articulate policies for optimizing the use of natural and human resources within their states, without of course losing touch with the greater national imperatives. (Based on the foreword by the Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh, in Report to the People 2004 – 2007)
- Activating and strengthening institutions of local self government calls for conformity to certain broad and generally well-accepted principles of institutional design.
- Village councils or Dorbars should be elected every five years and mandatory representation for women ensured
- For effective local self-government, major governance reforms are required as much in Panchayati Raj areas in the North East Region as in exempted areas. Governance needs to be strengthened by (a) laying out clear policy objectives (b) concurrent audit (c) post completion audit in all of which communities themselves play a role.
- A Review and Monitoring Mechanism to ensure transparency and time bound implementation of all projects above Rs. Five crore, with representation from the concerned government line department, independent technical and audit specialists as well as from the NGO sector (working in the specific field) and local government (Panchayat/Council etc.)
- Activity Maps to be prepared or activated to clearly delineate the attribution of activities comprised within each devolved function to the appropriate tier of the three-tier Panchayati Raj system so that there is no ambiguity at any level about the tasks entrusted to them or any overlapping of duties between different tiers.
- States with Panchayati Raj areas to clearly identify budgetary line items that ought to go to the Panchayats and separately earmark them through a Panchayat sector window in the budgets of the relevant state line departments to ensure the flow of funds for undertaking devolved activities to the Panchayats.
- By 2020 participative planning from the grassroots level upwards to culminate in the preparation of a district plan as a key step in the strengthening of Panchayats to be institutionalized as mandated in the Constitution. District Planning Committees (DPCs) are required to be *elected* to the extent of 80 per cent of the membership by and from amongst the elected members of the district level Panchayat (Zila Parishad) and the Municipalities within a district. Most states falling under Part IX of the Constitution (relating to constitution and composition of Panchayats) has now constituted DPCs, States like Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya which have not begun this exercise need to expedite the process.
- Engagement of all stakeholders, particularly of historically discriminated and marginalized sections, including women, in participatory planning and implementation. This has to be done to assess the resources in the villages and towns, identify and prioritize the needs and requirements and monitoring and evaluation of various projects, schemes and programmes.
- Devolution of adequate funds in an untied manner patterned on activity mapping of each level of governance. State governments will need to undertake a detailed analysis of their annual budgets, both non-planned and planned, to separate allocations to be transferred to Panchayats in accordance with the activities devolved to them. The funds available under various schemes can be allotted to the projects selected and prioritized by the people.
- Streamlining and consolidation of schemes to ensure flexibility and a measure of autonomy. This has to be done mainly at the state and central levels.
- Assignment of significant revenue raising powers and building capacity of local governments to raise revenues from the sources assigned to them.
- Attention must be paid to the democratization of the functions of Traditional Institutions, especially with gender representation. These include systems such as the Syiems, Dorbars and Rangbah Shnong of the Khasi Hills, the Dolois of the Jaintia Hills and the Nokmas of the Garo Hills of Meghalaya as well as other groups such as the Kuki-Impis, various clubs, associations and peoples' organizations of Manipur, Nagaland and other states. Traditional Institutions have varying levels of influence in different states although they are not recognized constitutionally and their demand for such recognition may be considered if these institutions are democratized and representative of all groups, instead of being exclusive entities.
- The Autonomous Councils will have to become the harbingers of economic transformation and not merely be legislative, regulatory and administrative agencies. To effectively assume a central role in local development, they will need to adopt a more participatory approach. Such a transition will need to emerge from within, as tribal communities themselves proceed to adapt their time-honoured traditional systems to the needs of inclusive participation and development. It may be desirable to consider the approach adopted in the Fifth Schedule areas, where democratic elections based on adult franchise and reservations to women in elected seats and leadership positions have been applied without reducing the importance of tribal customs and traditions.
- Meghalaya was granted Sixth Schedule status (Constitutional guarantee to statehood) when it was a part of the composite state of Assam, mainly as a safeguard for customary laws and practices of tribal minorities. Now that the state is ruled by a tribal majority, there may be merit in examining whether

the Autonomous District Councils should continue in their present form. The continuance of an institution which is virtually a standalone body with few linkages either with the State Government or with village-based institutions merits reconsideration.

SCENARIO OF NORTH EAST INDIA AS OF JUNE 2012

India's North Eastern region is a "rainbow country ...extraordinarily diverse and colourful, mysterious when seen through parted clouds". It stretches from the foothills of the Himalayas in the eastern range and is surrounded by Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Nepal and Myanmar. The region is rich in natural resources, covered with dense forests, has the highest rainfall in the country, with large and small river systems nesting the land and is a treasure house of flora and fauna. Marked by diversity in customs, cultures, traditions and languages, it is home to multifarious social, ethnic and linguistic groups.

Troubled by history and geo-politics, the North East has remained one of the most backward regions of the country. The trauma of partition in 1947 not only took the region backwards by at least a quarter of a century, but also placed hurdles on future economic progress. It isolated the region, sealed both land and sea routes for commerce and trade, and severed access to traditional markets and the gateway to the East and South-East Asia – the Chittagong port in East Bengal (now Bangladesh). It distanced the approach to the rest of India by confining connectivity to a narrow 27-km-wide Siliguri corridor, making it a "remote land" and constraining access for movement of goods and people. The uneasy relationship with most of the neighbouring countries has not helped the cause of development of the region either: with 96 per cent of the boundary of the region forming international borders, private investment has shied away from the region.

Poor infrastructure and governance is combined with low productivity and market access. Inability of governments to control floods and river bank erosion causes unmitigated damage to properties and lives of millions of people every year in the region. If the quest for ethnic and cultural identities has sowed the seeds, frustration and dissatisfaction from seclusion, backwardness, remoteness and problems of governance have provided fertile ground for breeding armed insurgencies.

CHALLENGES AND STRATEGY

The challenges to ensuring peace and progress in the region are formidable. The gap between the region and the rest of the country in terms of various developmental outcomes, productivities and capacities of people and institutions is large and growing, and has to be bridged. Even within the region, there are vast differences, particularly between populations living in the hills and in the plains and between those living in the towns and villages. Given the vast disparities within the region, a development strategy will have to be evolved depending upon prevailing resources, conditions and people's needs and priorities. Further, the development strategy for the various tribes in the region will have to be participatory and should be calibrated in their own setting. Given the complexity of the task, augmenting investment to accelerate growth in the region is only a part of the story. The successful transformation of investments into developmental outcomes requires a variety of strategic initiatives.

1. **Transportation and Communication:** The transportation and communication systems in the North East are under developed. National Highways are in need of repair. Movement within the Northeast is especially difficult during the monsoon months when rain wrecks havoc on road and rail infrastructure.
2. **Perceived feelings of neglect by New Delhi:** There is a perceived feeling of neglect amongst the population of the northeast. People believe that they are and will be neglected by New Delhi due to their peripheral situation and cultural differences.
3. **Cultural Differences:** The tribes of the northeast are mostly of the Mongoloid stock and they view themselves as different from the Aryan and Dravidian races of India. Due to a lack of a pan-Indian narrative of social and cultural inclusion in mainstream media, entertainment, government and other spheres, the people do not see a bright future if the status quo continues.
4. **Ethnic Violence:** Violence is endemic to the Northeast except in states like Tripura, Meghalaya and Mizoram where it has been handled more effectively. However, the Indian Army's heavy presence in these states makes them prone to future violence.
5. **Pressure on Land:** Due to increasing population, lack of state land reforms, oral traditions of land ownership, Jhum cultivation, migrant population, and intensive cultivation, the pressure on land for food and livelihood is on the rise. The inability of the state institutions to efficiently settle these land related insecurities has created tribal and ethnic "security dilemmas".
6. **Ethnic Security Dilemmas:** Security dilemmas in multi-ethnic and multi-tribal societies arise when one ethnic group harbours armed members. This leads to arming by rival ethnic groups which leads to classic security dilemmas.
7. **Militarization of the State's Presence:** The overt presence of the armed wing of a democratic state like India, i.e. its army has fostered the idea of a militarized India amongst the population. Hence, while the society is aware of the political corruption on the part of their local political representatives, they still prefer civilian representatives to the armed forces.
8. **Negative Political Culture:** The political culture in most of the Northeastern states is fraught with corruption, a lack of representation in power structures at the centre, and linkages between politicians and insurgent groups. This has resulted in an insecure society and an insecure state infrastructure. The foundations of democracy in the Northeast are therefore based not so much on values and principles but on political expediency. Laws like the Inner Line Permit of 1873 and the Restricted Area Permit, which inhibits access of outsiders into the region, also creates a "siege mentality" amongst the people.
9. **Insurgent Extortion Networks:** The extortion networks run by the various insurgent groups have resulted in almost every citizen having to pay some percentage of his/her income to the insurgent exchequer. This has intensified insecurities and fears of the insurgent guns.
10. **Economic Backwardness:** Though most of the rural India suffers from economic backwardness, it is most glaring regions, which are prone to violence. Because of this economic backwardness and lack of infrastructure development, most of the Northeastern states are heavily dependent on the centre for their political survival.
11. **Image of a Frontier:** The isolation, geographic fragmentation, and the problems associated with being viewed as peripheral to India's imagination of itself are dominant drivers of alienation in the Northeast.
12. **Quality of Education:** Despite the high literacy levels identified as a positive driver, the absence of quality education has resulted in a dearth of well qualified people to run the affairs of the state and also the economy.
13. **Porous International Border:** The porous nature of the 4,500 km international border between India and its neighbors in this region has resulted in the easy flow of drugs, arms, illegal migrants, and establishment of underground insurgent bases in countries like Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Also, the influence of the notorious "Golden Triangle" (Myanmar, Laos and Thailand) and the drugs trade spilling over into Northeast has resulted in high drug addiction amongst the youth of the Northeast.

OPPORTUNITIES

The economy of the region has been disrupted by the forces discussed in the preceding section in spite of her rich natural resources. Besides the natural resources, many new opportunities have also emerged with the changing contour of world economy that can boost the economy of the region. But, the need of the hour is to focus on those areas which would lead to growth of the economy, develop the sense of participation and can extinguish the social and political chasm. The three main areas that can boost the economy are as follows:

A) TOURISM

Tourism is one sector where the region has comparative advantage. This industry is highly competitive where the tourists have a wide range of choices and look for good value of their money. With bountiful nature's breathtaking scenic beauty, salubrious climatic conditions, extraordinarily diverse rich art and cultural heritage of the people, this region can become a hotspot for eco and adventure tourism.

Tourism industry involves a vast network of business activities relating to attracting, receiving, accommodating, managing and servicing of tourists. These include hotels, restaurants, transport agency and several other related activities. The development of this industry would promote national integration and

international understanding, generate employment and revenue and provide prospective buyers for local manufactured products especially handloom and handicraft products—a dyeing industry due to lack of access to market.

Tourism can generate more employment per million of rupees spent than any other activity. It can generate jobs in the remotest corners for unskilled to highly specialized skilled workers which would help in the realization of plan objectives. It would also enlarge the base of locally manufactured products. All this, however, would be possible only when there is well-developed infrastructure like transport and communication and sense of participation of the people of the region.

B) NATURAL RESOURCES

The main strength of the region for industrial development comes from its natural resource base. The huge hydro-electric potential has been assessed. Minerals like oil, gas and limestone have long been used to feed various industries and there is scope for further use of such resources for industrial use. The potentials of other minerals including uranium are yet to be fully investigated and established. Forest based industrial units have been on decline following the ban on felling of trees by the honorable Supreme Court of India in 1995. Forest and bio-diversity can yet be the resource base for developing industries in the region in the future. Besides the present crisis faced by it, the tea industry continues to be a major strand in the region's industrial set up. Processing of rubber and high value horticulture crops can also emerge as important industrial activity once the agriculture sector of the region gets commercialized and diversified. Traditional handicrafts skills of the people of the region is yet another resource with potential for supporting considerable industrial employment once the highly acclaimed tourism potential of the region is harnessed. Against the advantage of natural resource base, the major hindrances for industrial development of the region appear to be (a) dearth of local capital and entrepreneurship, and (b) marketing and transport bottlenecks.

C) BORDER TRADE

The lack of connectivity and access to market, the main causes for under utilization of resources and weak resource-industry linkages, have set the economy of the region by half a century behind. The region has lost the markets in her neighborhood, particularly in Bangladesh, due to partition, insurgency and diplomatic strains and tensions.

Due to the peripheral location and stiff competition from mainland industries having better access to critical inputs like finance, technology and management, the base of traditional manufacturing in the region has been eroded leading to deindustrialization. While resource base can support a variety of industries at all scales, the existing industrial structure, dominated by small-scale demand based industries has not been developed proportionately. This has widened the gap between resource base and industrial structure in the region. Further, due to the restriction of free movement of men and material across the border, the notion of isolation has developed in the minds of the people. It is in this context, there is a strong argument to develop border trade.

In this increasingly borderless world, establishment of border trade would not only provide an opportunity to revive the local manufactured units but also serve as a transit corridor for the mainland big industrial units to explore the vast Asian market. This would also bring the centrality and visibility of the otherwise peripheral north eastern region. It is with this vision that 'look east policy' was initiated in 1991. Unfortunately, as old habits die hard; the central government still continues to live in the shadow of security obsessed mindset and prefers inward looking approach. As a result, even after fifteen years of implementation of border trade agreement, it has failed to invigorate the region's trade with their neighboring countries. As a result, India's look east policy has, by and large, bypassed the region.

Over two-third of the total volume of trade with these countries flow via Bay of Bengal while the land borders of the region have been left for transit corridors for illegal trade. The tepidity of the central government in implementation of the policy has only led to rise in the porosity of these borderlands. An impressionistic assessment reveals that there is a rise in negative activities like cross-border insurgency, gunrunning, smuggling drugs, narcotics and AIDS, money laundering, trafficking women, illegal immigration etc. which further add to the existing multifarious problems in the region.

CONCLUSION

Globalization has become the most potent force emerged in recent time. It virtually affects every walk of life—positive or negative. Unlike other regions of the Indian union, North East India is more likely to swamp by its negative effects. The region is at the throes of discernible crisis. Since 1991, there has been increase in inequality and unemployment, decline in the quality of the governance, rise in smuggling, trafficking, illegal immigration, corruption, squandering of public funds, escalation in insurgency related activities, etc. These have led to underdevelopment and erosion of the capacity of the individual and quality of life. A sense of deprivation has developed particularly among the educated youths of the region. It is time to work on a holistic approach to resolve problems in the region.

People of the region have an ambitious vision: by 2020, they aspire to see their region emerge peaceful, strong, confident, and ready to engage with the global economy. They would like to march on the path of economic, social and cultural progress towards prosperity and well-being, to participate in governance and determine the allocation of public resources and public services they receive. Political empowerment in evolving responsive governance would help to achieve social and economic empowerment as well. They want to banish poverty and illiteracy and ensure that every family in the region has the opportunity to live a healthy and secure life with dignity and self-respect. Moving away from the dependency syndrome, people in the region would like to acquire the capability and self-confidence to shape their own destinies. They would like to enjoy their freedoms – freedom from hunger and poverty, the freedom to exercise choice in their avocations, income-earning and spending decisions, and political, economic and social freedoms without fear. They would like to enjoy peace and achieve sustainable progress and prosperity.

The region has more issues to be addressed and challenges to face than any other parts of the country. Of which, the three most important areas which require immediate attention are insurgency, infrastructure and governance. All the other issues are derivatives which would dry up once these three are addressed

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