

# Neglected, Deprived North-east: Is it the Whole Truth?

Nitin Gokhale

*Readers of Ishani may recall the name of the author of this article as we had carried a very interesting article by him in the last issue of Ishani. The article was captioned as, "Smile Seven Sisters." Acceding to our request, he has kindly sent us another article for the present issue. We look forward to regular contribution by him in our future issues also.*

*Shri Nitin A Gokhale, the author is working at present with NDTV, a leading 24-hr news channel of our country. Prior to joining NDTV, Shri Gokhale had been associated with the North-east for many years. He has interacted with all the important actors on the North-east scene. He has also been a witness of a number of crisis that emerged in this complex and colourful region of our country. He is thus eminently qualified to share his experiences, observations, and insights regarding the North-east. In his present article, Mr Gokhale deals with a common complaint that is heard by the people of the region and also by those who come to serve the region. The complain is that this region is neglected by the Union Government and its different agencies. Mr Gokhale has tried in this article to share his observations on the North-east with reference to this complain. He has an interesting style of writing which makes his article highly readable.*



Author

There are two very popular and convenient views in New Delhi about India's north-east. One view is that the region, comprising the seven states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura, is the country's pampered child. That the Centre has been pouring in disproportionate amount of money into the region, which is ultimately misutilized. The second school of thought holds that New Delhi and New Delhi alone is responsible for the economic backwardness of the region and that the neglect by the Centre is monumental.

The truth, as usual, lies somewhere in between.

The region has indeed suffered from so much neglect and apathy in the past that it is next to impossible to catch up with other parts of India. Therefore to say, as former Mizoram Governor, Amlok Ratan Kohli said at a seminar that "the north-east is a spoilt child of the Centre," is also a bit exaggerated.

Yes, all the seven states in the region are granted a "special category" status by the Government of India which means these States receive 90 per cent of Plan assistance as a grant, and just 10 per cent as a loan, as against the norm of 30 per cent grant and 70 per cent loan for other States. As former journalist and first minister heading the Department for Development of North Eastern Region (DONER), Arun Shourie was

wont to remark: "Funds are never a problem. Proper and timely utilization of the allocated money is."

And yet every state in the northeast is facing bankruptcy. Consider some more facts:

Fifty-six years after Independence, five of the seven state capitals in the region are not connected by rail. Itanagar, Kohima and Shillong (all State capitals) do not have a proper airport even now. The entire North-east has to import essential goods worth nearly Rs. 2,500 crore annually since the states in the region have not modernized their agricultural practices.

Nearly 55 per cent of India's tea production, 60 per cent of its plywood (till the timber felling ban came) and a substantial part of its oil is produced in the region but not even a tiny percentage of the profits is re-invested here.

Vital sectors like education, health care and communication are still in the primitive state in the region.

Nothing illustrates the neglect of the North-east by the Centre like the figures of funds released by All India financial institutions. Between 1996 and 2006, out of the Rs 72,000 crore plus sanctioned by these institutions, Assam got a measly 221 crore, Nagaland received Rs. 4 crore and the rest of the states went without a single paise. All the states in the region are today heavily in debt; Assam's internal debt in fact stands at a staggering Rs. 10,000 crore plus. Another development indicator, the credit deposit ratio of commercial banks for all the states in the region at 26.9 is substantially lower than the all-India average of 62.3.

Who is to blame for this mess? Not the Centre alone surely. After all, 10 per cent of each of the Central ministries' budget is earmarked for development of the region. Where does the money go then? In reality, the isolation and backwardness of the North-east has as much to do with the Centre's failure to monitor the funds utilization as with failure of local leadership and the lack of initiative on part of its own people.

For years, a section of the leadership and the educated elite among the North-Eastern states, have become willing partners with the 'exploiter' class from Delhi. Today, the entire North-east is dependent upon rest of India more than it ever was. There is no internal revenue generation worth the name in these states, private enterprise is more an exception than a rule and a majority of the population is dependant upon the government one way or the other. Insurgency, political instability and unending violence keep the region on a perpetual boil.

A high-profile study group constituted by the Ministry of Home Affairs in 2002 to draw up a 25-year vision on development of the North-east has made some interesting observations on the current state of affairs in the region. It blames corruption, insurgency and "contractor Raj," for the turmoil in the seven states of the region. "A parallel system of governance by the insurgents on the one hand and ministers, MLAs, the bureaucracy and police on the other, is responsible for the political instability and backwardness in the North-east," SK Agnihotri, Chairman of North-east Study Group (NESG) has said. Former IAS and IPS officers like K. Saigal and KPS Gill besides retired Lt. Gen SK Pillai were members of this group.

The group felt that the entire system of governance is in a state of collapse in the region. "Whatever money comes into the region for development ends up in the hands of a chosen few," former senior bureaucrat Saigal said. The militants then get a major share out of this, he pointed out. This happens mainly because of an inappropriate

development model, the group said wherein, the money gets concentrated in the hands of contractors and suppliers instead of trickling down to the masses.

The region is clearly trapped in a vicious circle, which, despite best attempts, no one has been able to break so far.

Economist Jayanta Madhab, formerly with the Asian Development Bank traces the region's problem to the country's partition. "Northern India suffered heavily in terms of lives lost during the turbulent period of partition, but the east and the North-east took a body blow in terms of infrastructure and links to the mainland," he points out. In one stroke of his blue pencil, Sir Cyril Radcliffe isolated the region from the rest of India. As a result, the region's seven states are now connected to the main body through a 20 km wide 'Chicken's neck' corridor running through North Bengal. This has added to the isolation of the North-east. For example, in the days of pre-partition era, residents of Tripura could reach Calcutta overnight. Today, it takes a minimum of 60 hours to do the same by road.

So the region's first problem is isolation. Physical isolation has aggravated the already existing mental quarantine. The British, as a deliberate policy followed the dictum leave-them-alone in splendid segregation. The new rulers in post-independent India refined it further by applying the yardstick out-of-sight-out-of-mind. The result: armed uprising in many parts of the North-east. Contrary to general perception outside the North-east, most of the insurrections in the region, except the Naga insurgency, are direct fallout of this neglect of the area by the ruling class both in Delhi and in the region. Large-scale misuse of Central funds has widened the gap between the haves and the have-nots resulting in frustration among the youngsters. This frustration has often found expression in the swelling ranks of the militant organization across the region. At last count there are some 40-armed militant groups operating in the region.

According to conservative estimates, there are 20 lakh educated unemployed youths in the region. So far the government has been the main employer. With time, however, jobs in the government are becoming few and far in between. Naturally, with hardly any employment available outside the government, the youths do not need much encouragement to take to arms since it provides easy money when you have a gun in hand. Insurgency today, therefore, has become a big business in the North-east. One educated estimate of the turnover in this 'industry' puts the figure at something like Rs. 250 crore annually!

The question is: Why has it happened? There are no clear-cut answers, but endemic corruption and poor management of funds are the two main reasons identified by many analysts. The funding pattern, evolved over the years has given rise to a nouveau rich class comprising mainly of the corrupt politicians, a section of bureaucrats and businessmen in the region.

The other issue is, people in the North-east have been indoctrinated by their leaders to look at themselves as victims of a conspiracy hatched by Central leaders and people of rest of India in general. The truth is, no one has the time or inclination to do so. The reality is several other states in the country are also suffering neglect and poverty as those in the North-east. In some cases like Orissa, Jharkhand and Bihar, the human development and poverty indices are worse than those in the North-east. For example, Orissa's poverty ratio at 47.15 per cent is far higher than Assam at 36.09 per cent. Or Bihar's poverty ratio at 42.60 per cent is much above any of the north-eastern states. Even the credit deposit ratio in Bihar, Orissa or Jharkhand, is lower than the north-eastern states. So why should the north-eastern states only get special attention, asks one

section of planners. My answer to that is: the North-east needs extra and focused attention simply because they are the bulwark against balkanization of India. Having said that, even the people of the North-east must admit that over the past decade, matters have certainly improved in terms of more funds, focused attention and more awareness about the region. And yet, we keep complaining about step-motherly treatment. We, in the North-east must ask ourselves: Are we protesting only for the sake of protesting?

So, have we lost the North-east forever? Many optimists, like me, are convinced that the North-east has several things going for itself to catch up with the rest of the country. Unlike most other states, the North-east has a very high percentage of literacy. This itself should be a major strength. All that this pool of manpower resources needs is proper direction. Take the natural resources available with the region. Arunachal Pradesh has so much of water resources available that it can produce about 30,000 MW of electricity through hydel projects. This energy is not only sufficient to feed the region's states but also to export to the neighbouring countries as well.

Another point that the North-east has in its favor is the proximity to South-east Asia. Identified by economic experts as the boom area of the 21st century, South-east Asia is best accessed from North-east India. The big question however is, who will do this? Not retired mandarins. Not people from MHA. Not people from rest of India.

Ultimately, it is the civil society, well-meaning politicians and committed bureaucrats, who will have to take up the lost cause and bring the North-east out of its current mess. Only then the rest of India will start looking at the North-east more seriously. Only then others will start treating the North-east not as an exotic faraway entity but as an integral part of the idea that is India.

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## **Around 6,000 Students Committed Suicide in 2006 in India**

*(An extract from the E-Newsletter of network of youth organizations in India (ICYO), No: 2008/23 dt. March 18, 2008)*

In 2006, 5,857 students — or 16 a day — committed suicide across India due to exam stress. And these are just the official figures. Shimla superintendent of police (crime), Punita Bhardwaj, said incidents of children committing suicide because of examination stress often did not get reported as traumatized parents wanted to keep the issue under wraps.

Anita Naresh, a 16-year-old from Kanpur who swallowed dye last week as she felt she had not done well in her Class X exams, is one of them. Her condition is still critical. A teenager from Chandigarh attempted suicide inside the examination centre but was taken to hospital just in time. Bangalore has witnessed a series of attempted suicides by students denied a hall ticket for a board examination owing to poor attendance.

According to Kolkata psychiatrist Debashish Roy, scores of youngsters seek counselling before and after the exam season and have to be put on medication.

It's not just board exams that get stress levels soaring in students. Entrance tests to professional courses that require extra coaching also have the same effect. St Joseph's Convent, Patna, teacher Shweta Priyadarshini put it best when she said: "Most students face two kinds of pressure: one due to the board examinations and the other due to competitive exams."

Sri Sankara Senior Secondary School, Chennai, class XII student Athreya Mukundsubramanian said he would not have any time to relax after the board examination as he would have to prepare for a series of competitive exams, including the All-India Pre-Medical and Pre-Dental papers and the IITJEE. "I wish I could just fastforward the next two months," his mother, Gayathri, said. "Why on earth can't the syllabus for entrance tests also be incorporated in the regular college syllabus so that students don't require additional coaching?" Shetty asked.

It is the combination of entrance tests and board exams that some students are finding it difficult to handle. "The examination system itself should be hanged!" That's the passionate cry from Amritsar lawyer B K Joshi. His relative, Amritsar Engineering College student Kanika Sharma died after consuming poison when she failed in mathematics.

Students have often held their teachers solely responsible for suicide. "I will come back as a ghost and harass my teacher," the suicide note left behind by a student from a prestigious Bangalore school said.

Some students have discovered other mechanisms to deal with the pressure, like running away from home or simply refusing to appear for exams. Two boys from a school in Ahmedabad walked out of their class X board exams for fear of failure. Three students, in three separate incidents in Chandigarh, ran away from home for fear of exams. (*Anahita Mukherji / Times of India*)