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Developing North-Eastern (NE) States

24.1 Brief history

A study of the North-Eastern States shows that not only J&K, situation in the NE states too is quite grave. Nature of problems may vary but seriousness of NE states is no less. We are giving below only a brief account of these states to identify their basic problems and suggest possible remedies.

- People of NE states by and large are soft spoken and simple. A society undergoing constant economic regression and acute scarcity of means of livelihood may express its resentment through general unrest and regular disturbances, which may eventually culminate into ethnic problems and separatist activism. They may also demand for separate states as in various other parts of the country, in the hope of alleviating their sufferings. Since their lives are not improving the unrest lingers. People do not realise that those who benefit from separate states are actually not those who are aggrieved rather those who run the new governments. **It depletes their already meagre resources in maintaining a full fledged governance, the bureaucracy, their offices, buildings, residences and huge staff besides phenomenal kleptocracy. All the money at their hands is consumed in building up and running this 'infrastructure'.** The past 60 years amply indicate that demand for separate states is a futile exercise and benefits none except the government machinery itself. Remember, prosperity can never be achieved by creating more states but by working for the states. If the system has not been able to deliver before, it will not be able to deliver now. This is simple logic. **People's sorrows is system's fortune; earlier we accept this harsh reality, the better.**

Looking in the larger perspective, from 15 states in 1947, the country has grown to 28 states and 7 union territories by 2001. But *hartals* and demands for further bifurcations have not stopped, neither they ever will under the present scenario. **Smaller states out of bigger**

ones have been a creation of post-independence era. Pakistan was the beginning as the price of Independence. Smaller states are made in pursuit of buying peace by the centre and fulfilment of the aspirations of the people. But nothing of this sort ever happens. Neither the centre is relieved of the problems nor the smaller states have ever progressed and provided relief to the suffering masses. It is bound not to happen anyway with the present system of governance.

- North-Eastern states are our disturbed states. From three union territories in 1947, they have grown to eight full fledged states by now. But off and on there are killings and demands for further bifurcation, autonomy or independence of these states. For example some Naga sections (National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN)) are for the past 20 years or more demanding the creation of Nagalim (Greater Nagaland) covering a few parts of Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh, while Manipur is demanding for independence and threatening for mass immolation if government submits to the demands of NSCN.
- A constantly disturbed area is not a happy situation for any country. To these states we have been providing financial aids and spending a fortune on regular basis but their condition refuses to change - neither the plight of the people ever improves nor the extremist activism or their demands ever abate. Once again whatever we spend is a relief. **It does no constructive work that would go a long way to provide them jobs or open up new avenues of income on a regular basis to engage them.** Here again, the main problem is foresight and a will to find out solutions on long-term basis. Giving alms can only make one destitute or direct him towards perverse activities, not make him a dignified person.
- Extremism or terrorism in the past 60 years too, has done no good. Everybody has been a loser. Why fight a battle that one can never win? In Kashmir, as elsewhere in the North-East, terrorist or extremist activism and counter terrorism has killed thousands but no one has gained. **It has rather dislodged many of their own families and friends who have even abandoned their homes and taken shelter elsewhere, as refugees in their own country. Many of them survive on the alms and gratis of others or government reliefs.**

We have belittled our sovereignty by not being able to protect and take care of our own people. It is a matter of shame for us. And then the loss of lives in many families. Our hearts go out to such people

wishing if we could mitigate their traumas, provide them some solace and solve their problems. These regions are characterised by retarded economic growth and social neglect. Lack of opportunities and avenues of earning for the local population in these regions is a matter of grave concern and that can be overcome only through development. There is no other way. We have many plans for the people of these states, as a result of which they will emerge as happy and prosperous regions in a short period of just 5-7 years. We are sure, with the prosperity of the region, the pervasive activities shall also vanish gradually.

- We find that the businesses and industries in these states were initially established by British, French and Portuguese, who would repatriate the profits to their own countries and deprive the local populace from reaping the benefits of their businesses except for some employment. The people of the state worked mostly as labourers and earned only meagre wages. [*Dr Manmohan Singh and others supporting liberalisation please listen to it.*] And obviously not all were employed because of limited number of industries and developmental works. It also led to increasing local grievances and added to their miseries. The states continued to reel under stark poverty even during post-independence due to lack of development. They continue to remain the most backward states, despite their very rich and virgin natural resources. The extremists killed Surinderpal, an industrialist, and Shankar Virmival, Chairman of Guhawati Chambers of Commerce, kidnapped foreign technical experts and made it impossible for the industries and businessmen to operate in these regions. This means the condition of the local people had been deteriorating for long which culminated into such extreme actions without realising that this may even erode what little they possessed.

A brief chronology of happenings :

- (i) Year 1972 : Indira Gandhi formed Northern Association for development and security of Northern States. Governor of each north-eastern state would head it by rotation. But bureaucracy in India means failure. They consumed the entire wealth at their disposal and the states continued to reel under the same woes.
- (ii) Year 1979-1985 :
 - “Quit foreigners policy” put to a halt even what little was happening.
 - Any aid from the centre was swallowed by the local governments and the bureaucracy, little reaching the populace.

- (iii) By early 1990s industrialists and businessmen repatriated to safer places. V.P. Singh was the prime minister.
- (iv) Year 1991-1996 : Dr Manmohan Singh (the then finance minister) encouraged entrepreneurs to set up businesses and industries there. He offered tax holidays and other concessions. But people were so frightened that nothing happened.
- (v) Year 1997 : The Northern Association was reorganized once again to swallow the wealth of the nation and the means of the poor. Madhu Dandavate former Union Minister was made the new head of this association. But as the machinery and the operators remained the same nothing happened.
- (vi) Year 2001 : Once again development of NE region was a priority for the then BJP government also. A separate ministry was created to initiate development work in the region. Mr Arun Shourie, Minister of Disinvestment, was made the incharge. But this was too late and did too little. The people's renewed disenchantment showed up again during his tenure. Political system in our country knowing nothing beyond relief in any case is redundant and incapable to deliver. **System ignorance abound.**
- Although a lot of financial packages are being provided to these states, their plight remains much the same. Earlier also a lot of money was allocated, but the money was spent only on records and plight of the people remained mournful. Money does not reach the people although it is shown as spent. And without tangible development it does no good anyway. **Giving alms is a short-term measure during emergencies. It cannot be a long-term solution to perennial problems.** Development alone can provide people regular means of sustenance. The wealth of the country is thus being drained out on such reliefs rendering our people poorer than before. Under these conditions more aids will mean more corruption and dissatisfaction amongst the people. The situation generally is similar wherever increased government aid is provided, be it J&K or NE states. For that matter even innumerable poverty alleviation programmes for the rural poor.
 - In the past 60 years different governments and their bureaucracies have failed to address the problems of the North Eastern states (like any other issue). Their economic conditions continue to be vulnerable and the revolutionary organisations keep growing. Most states are bankrupt and the people are reeling under unbearable backwardness, poverty, sorrows and grief. The actual plight of the populace there is

even worse than what we think or what meets the eye. Now there is large-scale migration of youth to different parts of the country in search of jobs and pursue higher studies. Their crusade against industrialists and businessmen has further compounded the problems. Some employment and economic support that these industries and businesses could provide to the local populace has also been destroyed. One should not forget that one can draw benefits out of prosperity not out of adversities. But this fact we often overlook due to our impulsive state of mind. If one believes in fighting, fight against those who are responsible for our plight, not those who are source of providing us means of earnings no matter however little it may be. Now everything has crumbled. The base to build a future has been destroyed. What ultimately have these revolutionary outfits achieved? Such organisations have done more harm than good to their own people.

24.2 Demography and Resources

Table 24.1
Demography and history of NE states
(North Eastern Council (NEC) comprising 8 hill sisters)

State (Capital)	Area in sq. kms	Approx. Population (year 2001) lacs	Status
Arunachal Pradesh (Earlier NEFA)(Itanagar)	83,743	11.0	Earlier a part of Assam
Assam (Dispur)	78,438	266.0	Lot of tribal areas
Manipur (Imphal)	22,327	23.89	Lot of tribes, castes and races
Meghalaya (Shillong)	22,429	23.19	
Mizoram ^a (Aizwal)	21,081	8.89	1985 – Mizo agreement by Rajiv Gandhi 1989 – Laldenga became CM but failed. By 2001 – at least 10 extremist organisations
Nagaland ^b (Kohima)	16,579	19.89	
Tripura (Agartala)	10,486	32.0	Statehood in 1972
Sikkim (Gangtok)	7,096	5.41	Now this 8th state is also included in the NEC
Total	2,62,179	390.27	

- Total population = 390.27 lac
- Total land area = 2.62 lac sq km [about 8.27% of total usable area (Section 4.1)]
- Of these Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram are almost cut off from the mainland
- Adjoining Countries – China, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Burma (Myanmar)

Source : Statistical Abstract of India, 2003

^a Earlier it was part of Assam.

^b Only in 1975 the rebels accepted to be part of this country

Table 24.2
Resources

The states are rich with many virgin non-renewable and natural resources.

Resources	(Year 1997)
Limestone	30,000 lac tonnes
Coal	928 lac tonnes
Iron ore	18 lac tonnes
Marble	74 lac tonnes
Crude oil	70 lac tonnes
Natural gas	14,000 cr cum.
Hydel capacity	50,000 MW – It can meet country's total present power shortfall.
Dense forests	Rich flora and fauna, wild life
Tourism	Very rich and traditional culture, folk dances, songs, fables and craftsmanship
Agriculture	- Rich gardens, orchards, tea - Rice, jute, mustard seeds.

24.3 Reasons of backwardness

People of the region are thinly connected with rest of the country and are a neglected lot because:

- There is absence of established industries and businesses.
- They lack economic development. We have learnt that income in some parts of these states is as low as 20% of our national per capita income.
- Brahmaputra valley is prone to floods causing perennial havoc and utter destruction.
- Paucity of roads, poor transportation and communication facilities.
- No railways.
- Lack of infrastructural facilities.

- Geo-topographical constraints : Infiltration of people from neighbouring countries, because of states' proximity to Bangladesh, Burma (Myanmar) and Bhutan. Tripura is the worst hit of all from infiltration of refugees and has become sort of a battlefield. Nothing has prospered here.
- Since people are connected thinly with the mainland, they consider themselves to be a separate-entity, like J&K.
- There have been no efforts for cultural and social unification of these regions with other parts of the country. People of the mainland are normally unaware of these states, their people, culture, sorrows and agonies. They are nearly a neglected lot. Their retaliation through extremism or revolutionary outfits, therefore, invokes little surprise.
- Lack of governmental will. For people of these states, government means mercantile army.
- High level of corruption.
- The states are almost neglected by the centre.

Due to lack of development and poverty the dissatisfaction amongst the people has risen and so has risen the extremist activism. It was and still is a dilemma with the people of these states whether to support such revolutionary outfits or not. They have witnessed with dismay their own governments acting like white elephants and eating away their meagre means. Initially the people pinned some hopes on the revolutionary organisations. But they too, having no base and operating according to the whims and fancies of individual leaders, have been of no benefit to the local people. Having no avenues of earnings, these organisations now act like leeches even with their own people. There is growing lawlessness because of many revolutionary organisations each supposedly dealing with the failures of these states. Some of the revolutionary organisations are;

- Self Defence United Front of the South East Himalayan Region (including ULFA, Bodo)
- Indo Burma Revolutionary Front (IBRF) - a result of ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam)
- Revolutionary Joint Committee (RJC) comprises 3 organisations of Manipur (They want to liberate Manipur from Indian control)
- United National Liberation Front (UNLF)- Manipur, PLA and PREPAK
- Naga's Khaplan organisation

- NSCN (National Socialist Council of Nagaland) demanding Nagalim (Greater Nagaland)

and many others, the maximum being in Assam and Manipur. Some regions have problems similar to those in Sri Lanka.

24.4 Conclusion

Economic bankruptcy means fewer avenues for sustenance leading to frustration and retaliation. Dwindling resources and mounting hardships are compounding it. Local disturbances, hooliganism and terrorism all are offshoots of such conditions and have led to a state of anarchy. Today the whole country is in the thick of it. Sooner we address these frightening indicators, sooner we can save our country.

- They (NE states) can however, draw solace from the fact that the kind of political system and bureaucracy that is ruling them is no worse than in other states or the centre. The plight of rest of the nation is also no better. Treatment meted out to rest of the country and its people is no better than meted out to them. But we agree that the plight of some of these states is even worse than the rest of the nation. It is indeed pitiable. But *we* assure them of unbound development through industrialisation, making use of their rich natural and cultural resources and tapping these for optimum benefit. *We* also assure to bring them into the nation building and share their sorrows. These states are rich in traditional art and culture. Tourism has a very high potential and so also generation of power. These two areas alone shall put them on top of the Indian map and *we* shall do that. Future will be glorious and dignified. Extremist, separatist or terrorist activism will become culture of the past. The disgruntled youth will become part of the nation building and contribute their mite in achieving the desired goals for themselves and their fellow beings. What has never happened before shall happen now.