

DEVELOPMENT

PRIORITIES

in

North

East

India

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Edited by

BIMAL J DEB

There can be no two opinions about the fact that special category status of North Eastern states by itself failed to generate any worthwhile development and as a result the region continues to remain in the vortex of backwardness. It is against this background that the new development initiatives ought to be taken into account. What is, however, urgently needed is to set forth an agenda for development outlining the priorities so that concerted efforts could be set in motion to achieve the objectives. Hard decisions are indeed needed to tackle misdirected efforts and this calls for creation of a congenial atmosphere for investment and entrepreneurial activity. This book provides an indepth analysis of the core issues that require immediate attention of planners and administrators.

Bimal J. Deb is Professor of Political Science, North-Eastern Hill University. He is a former General Secretary of the North-East India Political Science Association. Currently he is also Hon. Secretary, Meghalaya Regional Branch of Indian Institute of Public Administration and Treasurer of North-East India Council for Social Science Research.

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BACKGROUND

B. J. Deb

Development dialogue in North-East India admittedly hinges on tackling backlogs in basic minimum services and infrastructural needs. The fact however remains that development problems are compounded by insurgency and insecurity. While backwardness of the region stemmed from geo-political realities, militancy got its fillip from unprecedented ethnic mobilisations which sought legitimacy by being within the framework of politics but more through unconstitutional means. Although the question of central neglect is debatable, one fails to understand why its approach lacked uniformity and long term perspective.

Divergent approaches were formulated from time to time without any clear-cut sense of purpose. Some decisions taken were not even put into action. Created with the twin objectives of development and security, the North-Eastern Council remained a halfway house unable to make any dent whatsoever in either sphere. Instead of playing an advisory role in regional development, it became a mere funding agency, an unwitting platform of acrimony, bickering and mutual suspicion.

In the NEC every State was interested in getting its schemes approved oblivious of long-term interests. While Mizoram and Tripura persistently demanded equitable distribution of funds, Arunachal Pradesh did not see eye to eye with Assam on hydel projects. The term seven-sisters remains rhetoric — a euphemism used by politicians to fan emotions. The seven States of the region enjoy special category status to develop backward areas. They get preferential treatment in the matter of distribution of Central assistance bypassing the Gadgil formula which gives weightage to population, incidence of poverty and performance. Dilution of the formula meant plan assistance to the States to the extent of 90 per cent grant and 10 per cent loan. For the non-special category States the ratio is 30 : 70. Further, under the modified Gadgil formula Central plan assistance to special category States during the Eighth Plan was about 30 per cent of

the total normal Central assistance. No less gratifying is the fact that the North-East with five per cent of the country's population has the highest per capita investment. Even then there is no perceptible development commensurate with the flow of money from the Central coffer. In the Union Rural Development Ministry's latest assessment there has been diversion of rural development funds to the militants which necessarily hampered rural upliftment. Time and again the Centre has made it known that development of the North-East is vital for tackling extremism or strengthening national security. The growth of extremist organisations, coupled with the ability of some of them to influence the process of legitimate politics and the alleged nexus of political parties with such forces, are undoubtedly impeding the development process.

This volume addresses the problems and constraints of development in the North-Eastern region, from multidimensional angles and outlines the priorities of today. Amalesh Banerjee in his *Development Dialogue* sets in motion contours of development and examines the contemporary social and economic institutions in India and their receptivity to economic change. Against this background, it was very appropriate that investment priorities in the North-East were properly examined. At the same time, the scholar underlines the need to organise public initiative to spur the Government into action. A.C. Mahapatra discusses rather convincingly several coexisting paradigms that explain underdevelopment in the region and pleads for a blue print of development based on internal capabilities and comparative advantages and achieve goals on a sustainable basis. Carrying the development discourse further, B.S. Butola examines the applicability of rational development paradigm to North-East Region and focuses in particular on nationalism and cultural development, development *versus* sustainable development, state *versus* civil society and power *versus* employment. Globalization, a catch word of today may not be a panacea for economic ills that confront us and hence A.K. Maiti suggests adoption of abundant caution in seeking application of this trend. In a rather sceptical tone, he comes to the conclusion that regional and rational development would be shelved for all practical purposes in the current era of globalisation. J.B. Ganguli, on the other hand, is optimistic even though he refers to the UNDP findings that the process has not ensured the distribution of benefits evenly amongst nations and within nations. While pointing out the possible adverse impact of globalisation he suggests a new development paradigm stating that people of the North-East Region must have the liberty to decide what would be the appropriate technology for their productive enterprises and at what pace they would

take advantage of the technological changes for improvement of their social, cultural and economic condition. The observation that civil society must play a vital role in ensuring effective participation of the people at the grassroots level in such a planning regime may indeed form the core of further developmental activities in the region.

Keeping civil society in the background of his conceptual analysis Asok Kumar Ray presents a case study on 'Assam Rural Infrastructure and Agricultural Services Projects' which is a World Bank sponsored project. According to the scholar, in the bandwagon of globalisation the tall claim of poverty alleviation as stated in the project document may not turn out to be sustainable.

The comprehensive review of natural resources of North-East India as a spring board for sustainable development in the twenty-first century has been presented in the book by A.K. Mishra in the context of worsening poverty and degradation of natural resources. A theoretically sound integrated development approach would be the best for natural resource management, environmental protection and overall well-being of the people of the region. The strategy suggested for natural resource management for sustainable development rightly puts emphasis on ensuring people's participation in natural resources conservation. The status of resource availability in the region is not disputed but it is all the more important to control forces which jeopardise resource sustainability. T.B. Lahiri presents an impressive analysis of the socio-economic parameters of the region on the basis of which he identifies priorities in social science research. In a more appropriate manner, the development scenario in the region is corroborated by N.N. Bhattacharyya with an emphasis on speedy and integrated development, although no particular strategy is put forward. The development dialogue continues with the presentation of its socio-economic perspective by Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti in which he pinpoints the need to rise above narrow sectarian interests and have a clear vision of the ideal type of society into which we want to transform ourselves. Any discussion on developmental issues in the North-East India is bound to be incomplete without taking into account the implications of shifting cultivation, a practice which continues to be so widespread in the hill areas of the region that all attempts at *jhum* control have proved to be inadequate. The crux of matter continues to be the control mechanism which alone could rejuvenate economy of the region and bring about improvements in the socio-economic condition of the people. This has been examined in detail by D.N. Borthakur giving a thrust on adoption of strategies aimed at providing a viable alternative to shifting cultivation.

A critical component of development of the North-East region is admittedly the human development indices and this view is presented by R.P. Bhattacharjee by taking a clue from Human Development index introduced by the UNDP in 1990. Equally important is the issue of population growth and environmental crisis in North-East India well explained rather convincingly by P.C. Dutta. This emphasis assumes importance specially because the planning efforts in India are directed to improve the standard of living and quality of life. Another paper entitled 'Population Growth and Demographic Balance' by Kailash Sarma discusses how the balance between different groups of people, whether ethnic, religious or linguistic, is disturbed.

Of late, Non-Governmental Organisations have come to occupy a distinct space in civil society. However political economy of the developing countries is full of contradictions and paradoxes which also limit the scope of NGO participation in the economic development. B.J. Deb examines the comparative advantages enjoyed by the NGOs even though the fact remains that they do not reach the poorest segment of the population especially in the rural areas. However, the rationale of bottom up approach for spreading the fruits of development is not disputed, although it is too early to say that NGO activism signifies the emergence of an alternative paradigm of social change. Sustainable development according to D.N. Chakravorty requires meeting the essential needs of all citizens and extending all opportunities to satisfy their aspirations for a better life. While stressing a sensible participation of people, he refers to an NGO working in the field of rural development in Assam which raised agricultural productivity considerably. In the same vein, K.K. Satapathy analyses the benefit of enlisting people's participation in soil conservation and watershed management programmes in the North-Eastern region. It has been rightly held that along with the introduction of innovative technologies, the use of indigenous knowledge and local innovations must be fostered and encouraged.