


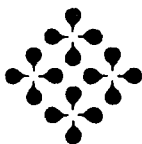
Political Economy *of* North-East INDIA

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Political Economy of North East India



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INTRODUCTION

Political Economy of North East India is introduced in the course of the fourth semester in Political Science in Assam University. Perhaps, it is unique innovation in the studies on North East India. Already, in all the disciplines under the Social Science in the university, there is at least one paper on North East India and the students are to deal with different aspects concerning this region. The political economy, in this respect is little different as the students are not introduced to political economy earlier and without any theoretical foundation, it poses a certain problem for them. There are large number of scattered materials available on North East India and it is not possible for students to gather them at short notice for studies.

The independence has brought this region under a new focus and there is urgency in bringing its unique features under studies. The centre is also willing to treat this region as special responsibility. We feel that the students should start the deliberations on a positive note. Political Economy, of late acquired significance in the curricula of large number of universities in the World. In the west, it is hotly pursued in the academic circles. There is increasing realization in our country that the political economy of vital aspects concerning our economy and politics intermingling at many points are to be studied to find out solutions to the problems. The awareness is to be generated on the functioning of our political economy from macro to micro levels of their operations.

In North East India, its emphasis does not require elaboration as the complexities here are diverse in this region. The economic conditions varied from state to state in the region. The population explosion continues unabated. It is now anybody's guess to visualize the state of political economy a few decades removed from today. There is staggering rise in population which is again uneven. Some states registered great rise in population and most of the states registered above the national average.

There are various aspects of political economy that can be studied but the studies cannot be total as the problems pile up as the years pass by. The basic problem of underdevelopment cannot be denied and its roots are embedded in the history of the region. Stigma attached to the region as economically most backward still clings to it and it has turned into a consumer region looking to the advanced states for the important supplies the region required for subsistence.

Some theories which find mention in the study like the Dependency

theory, the Elite theory and the problem of globalisation do have their effects on the political economy of the region. There are obvious limitations to the application of these theories and paradigm but the similarities and effects can be tested in the region. A student can appreciate the problems in the region better if some pre-conceived ideas are tested here.

The diversity exists in population pattern and the existence of seven states in a geographical area of 2,550,00 sq. km. which represents 7.7% of the total geographic area of the country. Its population is 39.05 million which is 3.75% (approx.) of the country's population (with Sikkim's population added). With little population when the country achieved independence, the rise in recent decades is phenomenal. The old process of autonomy movement is still current and these are vigorously pursued by some ethnic groups but their process, stalemate or success seem to have no dent on the pattern of political economy in the region. The result in any autonomy movement is visible in the creation of an elite in the successful ethnic group who control economy as well as politics to the detriment of the interests of the people at the grass roots.

The population composition is diverse. The Mongolians, the Austriacs and the Aryans and even the Negrito bloods flow in the veins of the population making this region unique sphere of studies. The broad classification of genre are further divided into species of ethnic groups who form the great cultural mosaic that is North East India. So long population was small and these ethnic groups lived in isolation, there was no cause for concern as their own economic and political systems did not clash mutually very often. The isolation provided some sort of protection. The modernity took away this feature from them and they are now exposed to uneven competition and there are clashes of interests exposing the life of an ethnic group into turmoils of all sorts. The liberal democracy that we have, may provide political autonomy after some time of biddings but it cannot immediately bring to them the economic autonomy that is so urgent concomitant of the political deliverance. In the North Eastern region, this game of perplexing equations is very difficult to solve. It only denotes the widely held belief that the economic empowerment is more difficult than political empowerment.

The elitism in governance and also in the society has certain set pattern and an elite once formed seems to be irreplaceable in the region. The presence of two sets of powers in one set of hands is largely accepted here as a truism. The region's feudal and non-capitalist background has something to dictate in the process of elite formation in the region. The region being in the periphery of the nation suffer from all sorts of material and psychological syndrome associated with it. Often the best statecraft is the one which deals not only with the ideology but also with the reality of being placed in a certain geo-political situation. Our North Eastern region share 98% of its borders with the foreign countries—Bhutan, China, Bangladesh and Myanmar. It is not always a peaceful living with the fragile

borders. What hurts people of the region at the grass roots is the economic ordeals faced daily on the borders. There was a very long history of border trade with Bangladesh and Myanmar. Some million people living on the two sides of the borders. They earn their livelihood by trading their mutual merchandise in the border huts. They survived on that for centuries. The political borders erected in 1947 had cut short its ready availability. The good scholars on the subject wrote voluminously on the opening of the border trade between the region and the foreign countries. The government had put restrictions on the trade by adopting some rules, presumably for the regulation of the trade. There are, obviously some operators who are small in number but with big turn outs and there are very large number of ordinary people who live on the borders and they come with their small merchandise every day to eke out their living. They live their every day with this trade. For them, there is no other alternative. The people on the southern slopes of the composite districts of the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills and the districts in Garo Hills, live in that condition for centuries. The very ordinary people do not have any notion of the great urge for sanctity of the borders. They normally return to their hamlets after the day's work is done. The people on the Indo-Myanmar borders are most of the tribes belonging to the Naga and Kuki groups of people. Through the borders, the goods enter into our territory and some from our side also cross borders, the fragile and politically not so sensitive borders with Myanmar also see the narcotics entering into the region in clandestine manner. This is a dangerous situation as through the narcotics, come the virus of the dreaded disease, Aids. Yet, the trade with Myanmar cannot be closed as it is the question of survival of the people on the borders. Four states of the North Eastern Region—Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram—have trade links with Myanmar for centuries. In absence of self employment potentialities in this region, the border trade is a solution of their economic ills. Roughly estimated, it is found that the formal trade is the insignificant part of the whole volume of trade with these countries. The informal or the unofficial trade far outweigh the volume in official trade. The operators by pass the official regulations very often and in many cases, the officials themselves help this clandestine business. The free trade on the borders on some essential goods might be one of the solutions. The border trade can help people living on the borders, the Indo-Bangladesh border is porous and there is always great amount of human movement across the border and it is really very difficult to check the flow of that movement. If the Indo-Bangladesh on the North Eastern side is porous, it is more so on the west Bengal-Bangladesh side. The illegal trade is going on unabatedly. There should be a better mechanism to maintain trade with this important neighbour of ours, it is most likely to be beneficial for the states in the region. The border on the Myanmar side is hilly and the human movement there is much more easier.

Tourism can only develop in an atmosphere of peace and the north

eastern region of this country has not known peace for many years. Very often, peace is broken by the sound of guns. There are many good spots in the region which may attract tourists. Towang in Arunachal Pradesh has a Buddhist monastery which is visited by many people. Parasuram Kund in Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh also attracts many visitors. So, also the excavation site at Malinithan. In Assam, the national parks at Kaziranga and Manas are two such attractions. Shillong in Meghalaya with its salubrious climate attract many people. Jatinga in North Cachar Hills where birds allegedly commit suicide is also another destination. Large number of people outside have special fascination for the Vaishnavite culture of Manipur, specially the Manipuri dance, notwithstanding the fact that there is now an anti- Vaishnavite movement in the state propagated by the forces inimical to its union with India. The state of Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and Nagaland may easily attract visitors. The outside people want to know the diversity in cultures in those states. It is seen that the region is not organizing its tourism in the viable manner. But it is admitted by everybody that it has got great opportunity. The Centre may facilitate the expansion of tourism by developing road and air communications.

Self reliant economy in this region is possible if the fund available to this region is spent properly. Unfortunately, this does not happen in this region. Almost all states squander away their meagre resources for infructuous spending. All states suffer not because they lack real resources, they suffer for their misdirected financial spending. The extension of political powers should be attended with economic revival which is self propelled.

The hill economy is the extension of the social system they are enjoying throughout the centuries. The economic and political interests are interwoven. The change of political system has its effects on the economic system. The study of the district councils indicate that the introduction of the constitutional contrivance in the hills is responsible for the decline of their traditional system. In some hill areas, the decline was very fast, the decline was gradual in other areas. The district showed a steady centralizing trend every where and the villages are looking to the headquarters for assistance which they need always.

A student is supposed to know the location of each state in the region, its area, population and other important statistics for better understanding the region. While the area is not variable, other factors are variable and the population shows great changes in one decade. Some states show galloping population rise. The resources are also limited but the users are increasing in number. The natural resources need to be protected, particularly in the hills. The forest cover in the region is under strain as the region population often usurp on the forest. population often usurp on the forest. Forest in Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills is dwindling after the independence. The increase in forest cover is linked up with the rise in

population. The identity in a tribal community is endangered with the forest cover depleting in areas. The experts say that 50% of the lands in hills must be covered with forest. Some states like Arunachal Pradesh and Tripura seem to have that minimum limit but others showed steady decline.

Assam University first conceived the idea of introducing this subject in the syllabus. It is broad based. The chapters proposed in the syllabus are:

- i] Society, Economy and Polity, Inter relationship.
- ii] Society, Economy and Polity–A profile.
- iii] Impact of the British Annexation on the economy and the polity of the North East–Anti Colonial! Struggle.
- iv] Growth of political consciousness in the post-independence era–Its relationship with various autonomy movement.
- v] Development Process in the North East in the post independence era: Constraints and Prospects.
- vi] Impact of Development Process on the Society, Economy and Polity.

The information given in the North East Profile are subject to change. The names of Governors, Chief Ministers, the High Officials in N.E.C. may change. So is the population. The Election held in February 26, 2003 had altered C.M.s in two States, Nagaland and Meghalaya. In the November 2003 election in Mizoram, MNF was returned to power again with Zoramthanga as the Chief Minister. A student is required to update his information in the vital fields of Statistics.

The above syllabus, when studied in detail bring into focus many problems which are peculiar to this region. Some of these are mentioned already. In describing these issues, the interactions of the polity and the economy are to be discussed. None of these phenomena–Polity and Economy–can prosper in isolation. Where their combination work and where there is discordant note are to be noted carefully.

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