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## **Understanding Governance in the Context of Northeast India**

### **Introduction**

The 'governance' is not a new concept to social sciences. Literally meaning 'steering', the term has been in use in political science, economics and management disciplines for a long time. Governance describes the process of making and implementing decisions. Governments no doubt play the most important role in policy making and implementation, but several other formal and informal actors, institutions and organizations also influence governance. To cater to social needs of the time, every political society – be it tribal, capitalist or socialist – will develop its own forms of governance. The actual stakeholders involved in governance process vary from country to country and from one stage of human development to another. In the contemporary world of nation states, apart from formal players like parliaments, bureaucracies, political parties, pressure groups, media etc., the nature and outcomes of governance are determined also by external agencies, insurgent groups, mafia and religious and ethnic organizations who influence governance. Governance presupposes that we make the best use of available resources – physical, financial and human – and neutralize the negative influences emanating from the environment through appropriate policies and programs.<sup>1</sup> Every social system gives birth to its own notions of good governance. Governance being a process, not an end product, there always remains some scope for modifications and improvements in the nature and form of governance in every system. But to what extent governance could be improved or altered would depend on the nature and limits of the given state/societal structures and social forces. Studying the governance process helps one to understand the nature and dynamics of a host of actors, institutions and social forces and explain what they can or cannot do in the given system.

In recent decades, the USA, the European Union and international organizations and bodies such as World Bank and IMF have hijacked the discus-

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sion on governance and have started promoting particular forms of governance in pursuit of their neo-liberal agendas. The absence of socialist camp and the weakening of the Third World challenge made the western camp, headed by the USA, feel that it is easier now to penetrate into the markets of the developing countries and make them conducive for monopoly trade and investment. The capitalist-imperialist powers have however realized that their interests could never be safeguarded and promoted as long as political and social conditions conducive to the operation of 'free market economy' are absent or remain weak in the developing countries. This realization has now forced the imperialist nations and the aid agencies to link aid and investment to what they view as good governance.<sup>2</sup> Different imperialist powers and organizations are coming out with their own governance indicators to assess and rank the status of Third World countries that seek foreign aid and investment. Since 1990s World Bank started using a six-point measurement index to rank the states.<sup>3</sup> The USA, which till the other day supported and aided the dictatorial and reactionary regimes around the world, has now started talking in terms of facilitating the restoration and strengthening democracies that respect rule of law, human rights, property rights and free market. The US government linked distribution of funds from its Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) to those who rank better in terms of governance.<sup>4</sup> In the hands of World Bank and the USA, the concept of governance has thus lost its descriptive and analytical character and has come to be seen from the perspective and interests of the monopolies. With no other alternatives to turn to, the ruling elite in the developing countries, desperate to seek foreign aid, technology and investments, have accepted these western notions of governance and started taking steps to initiate changes in their respective countries as desired by the donor nations or agencies. This external ranking has been forcing the governments in the developing countries to conduct 'free' elections, establish human rights commissions, make acts such as Right to Information, involve NGOs in development programs, and enact laws to contain corruption and redtapism, reduce welfare and developmental roles of the governments and facilitate the opportunities for operation of free market economy. Although some changes may not be objectionable *per se*, it needs to be kept in mind that the initiatives are taken more to please the external agencies than to attend to the needs and aspirations of the people. As in many other developing countries, the ruling classes in India also have accepted this externally determined notion of governance and have started taking steps to project itself as a country with better governance. In recent years, even in Northeast India

one started hearing sermons from time to time from the corporate media, ministers and pro-establishment intellectuals, as to how the peoples and governments here should conduct themselves to attract Indian or foreign investments, so that the region could catch up with the rest of India.

As against such ideas of governance imposed from above, there is a need to develop a pro-peoples' alternative notion of governance keeping in view the interests of the people and the living realities of the country or the states we live in. The need for developing or accepting governance indicators should not be to secure appreciation or rewards from external agencies. Good governance is to be sought in order to liberate the energies and potentialities of the people and ensure holistic development of the region. It should take into consideration the needs and aspirations of the people, especially of those classes and communities that are marginalized and neglected. Keeping this objective in mind, the present paper seeks to review the existing literature on the state of governance in Northeast India and there from arrive at some conclusions about what could be possible and desirable parameters of good governance in the context of Northeast India.

### **Contextualizing Governance in Northeast India**

During the British rule, the hill areas and the princely states in the northeastern region were kept out of the political-constitutional processes that started shaping governance in British India since the middle of the nineteenth century. The people inhabiting these hill areas and princely states could not take part in any elections and send their representatives to provincial or imperial governments. Later with the avowed objective of building a sovereign capitalist nation state, the Indian national bourgeoisie that attained the state power after the end of the colonial rule adopted a liberal democratic constitution and created a parliamentary form of government with federal features. The Indian national leadership sought to integrate even hill areas and princely states of the Northeast into the Indian Union. The Constitution guaranteed Indian citizenship to all of them and granted them the right to participate in the elections for both central and state governments. At the same time, considering the historical specificity of hill areas of composite Assam and the need to assuage the fears of hill communities, the Sixth Schedule was included as a part of the Indian Constitution. For the benefit of hill tribes, the Sixth Schedule proposed creation of autonomous district and regional councils to take care of several issues of their immediate concern.<sup>5</sup> The autonomous councils introduced elements of competition and elections, unknown

to traditional tribal societies. Responding to the Mizos' aspirations, the Government of Assam did away with the absolute powers of traditional tribal chiefs. The erstwhile princely states of Manipur and Tripura were treated as special category states for sometimes. Later on, they were made Union Territories and finally, granted separate state status within the Indian Union. To pacify the growing political aspirations of the hill tribes, the state of Assam was reorganized, giving birth to states of Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram. The North Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA), inhabited by several tribes, was rechristened as Arunachal Pradesh, first as a Union Territory and later on given the status of a state. Subsequent to the formation of tribal states, in Meghalaya and Mizoram wherein the Sixth Schedule operated, the district councils were reorganized to suit the new political requirements. Succumbing to popular pressures, autonomous district councils were created in Tripura and Manipur under the aegis of state governments. Recently, the district council in Tripura has been included under the Sixth Schedule. Such a change has not yet taken place in Manipur, although several hill communities have been fighting for the same. Interestingly, the tribal people in Arunachal Pradesh accepted the Panchayati Raj system without much protest and there has not been any visible demand for constitution of autonomous councils in the state. As such today, the northeastern region has seven states, out of which four are tribal dominant states. Even in the other three states, tribal communities are there in substantial numbers and no government could afford to ignore their presence.

The introduction of liberal democratic institutions has brought in party politics into the region. Apart from national political parties like Congress, Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), communist parties etc., several regional and ethnic based parties operate in the region. The political parties in actual operation differ from state to state. Barring in Assam, Tripura and to some extent in Mizoram, where party system has made some impact, the political parties in other states are highly volatile and move around certain individual leaders. Politics in these states generally revolves around regional and ethnic interests. Tribal chiefs, traditional political institutions and the Church are capable of influencing public opinion in Nagaland, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh. Secular associations of employees, industrial / plantation workers and peasants are some what active in Tripura and Assam. Ethnically based student and youth organizations have strong roots in almost all the states in Northeast. They have led powerful social movements on behalf of their communities. In recent years, several government-sponsored or externally

funded development NGOs have started making their presence felt in the region. Militant groups of one or the other kinds are active in all the north-eastern states. All the states also have human rights organizations, which are often alleged to be frontal organizations of one or the other ethnic militant groups. In addition to such regional players, the Indian military and paramilitary forces personnel stationed in the Northeast and the migrants from across the borders and from different states in the mainland India also constitute forces capable of influencing the governance in the states. Governance that one encounters in the northeastern states is the result of interactions among these different formal and informal actors, institutions and agencies.

### **Major Factors Influencing Governance in Northeast India**

There have been quite a few studies on administration, policies and programs in the north-eastern states. However, the term governance has become popular only in recent years. Many scholars working on the problems of the Northeast have also started using the concept to understand and analyze the performance of the states. Despite differences in their ideological positions and analyses, their writings help us to comprehend some aspects of governance in the Northeast. A review of the existing literature on governance in the northeastern states would therefore throw light on different factors influencing the nature and outcome of governance in the region.

#### **1. Institutions, Political Culture and Governance**

The social scientists are aware for long of the fact that in the absence of supportive material and cultural base, political institutions fail to live up to their substance. This is true of the parliamentary institutions implanted in the northeastern states also. Till India became independent, the traditional institutions were looking after the needs of tribal communities inhabiting the hill areas of Northeast India. Tribal chiefs enjoyed considerable authority over their respective communities. The powers of traditional institutions and tribal chiefs, however, got considerably diluted with the imposition of modern constitutional institutions in the form of elected councils. In the Mizo Hills district the institution of chief-ship was totally abolished to satisfy the aspirations of the Mizo people who rose in revolt against the oppressive Mizo chiefs. In contrast, the tribal chiefs in Nagaland, who were more democratic and considerate, enjoy considerable respect from the community members even to this day. In case of Meghalaya, although political author-

ity of the Syiems (local proto-kings) was considerably reduced with the growth of modern political institutions, traditional headmen in the villages and urban localities still enjoy some amount of legitimacy. The institution of *darbar* in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills and *kebang* in Arunachal Pradesh continue to work, meeting certain needs of the people at village or locality levels. While L.S. Gassah and B.D. Sharma reflected on the adverse impact of constitutional governance on traditional institutions and community traditions, scholars like David Syiemlieh, Bengt Karlsson and Toki Blah have thrown light on the continuing social relevance of traditional institutions and on dependence of state governments and district councils on institutions like *darbars* for maintenance of law and order, sanitation, settling of disputes etc.<sup>6</sup> On the other side of the fence, one would come across academics like Apurba K. Barua and Rajesh Dev pointing out how these clan based, gender insensitive traditional communitarian institutions, averse to all forms of dissent, impinge on the normal functioning of the governments by promoting ethnic agendas of the upcoming indigenous elite, who are insensitive to the values of liberalism, democracy, equality and human rights.<sup>7</sup> But such a criticism of traditional institutions appears to be misplaced, since the way the modern constitutional institutions have been working in both tribal and non-tribal dominant states in the Northeast are not in anyway better. In fact politicians and bureaucrats in states like Assam and Manipur are alleged to be more corrupt and insensitive to people's concerns. In his discussion of the process of elections in different northeastern states, Monirul Hussain cites instances of corruption, money power, horse trading and criminalization of politics and concludes that democracy that one encounters here is neither formal nor substantial.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Sanjib Baruah points out that dependence of all northeastern states on the central funds for running their administrations make mockery of the concept of autonomy and self-reliance enshrined in the concept of federation and makes federal order in India cosmetic in content.<sup>9</sup> Many have also shown that despite variations in degrees, ethnic mindsets continue to dominate the political culture of Northeast India and hence civil society that rises above ethnic loyalties and thinks in terms of citizenship is still dormant or weak in the region.

## 2. *Ethnicity and Governance*

The influence of ethnic politics and conflicts in the region on governance is also discussed in several academic works. According to scholars like Sanjib Baruah and Rajesh Dev, the Sixth Schedule which made provision for autonomous district councils and regional councils in a way helped to consoli-

date ethnic identities amongst different tribal communities, encouraging them to aspire for greater autonomy and more powers.<sup>10</sup> Creation of some states dominated by tribal people, have now encouraged many more to aspire for separate state status. Competition for land, employment and political power pitted one ethnic community against the other, leading to violent ethnic conflicts. Wherever the dominant tribes could craft political space for themselves in the form of autonomous district councils or states, they began to dominate other communities inhabiting the territorial units, making them second grade citizens. At times to consolidate their authority, the dominant communities indulge in violence and genocide forcing the ethnic minorities to migrate to other places. The governments in these states made special provisions for promoting the officially recognized indigenous communities in fields of education, employment and political power. In practice, not only the non-tribal people, even minority tribes who were not officially recognized as indigenous tribal communities in the state are deprived of equal opportunities and rights in these states. This is however not to say that all sections of the dominant tribal communities in the hill states have equal access to all state resources. In her writings, Tiplut Nongbri has explained how economic development and growth of private property have come to split the tribal communities into classes, with many losing access to land and other common resources and becoming landless laborers.<sup>11</sup> The educated middle classes, who lead the ethnic movements and talk of identity and tribal interests, hardly represent the interests and concerns of poor peasants and landless laborers. Most NGOs claiming to be working for upholding the interests of the ethnic communities are concentrated in the urban areas and they are conspicuous by their absence in villages and remote areas.

### 3. *Extremism and Governance*

Several extremist organizations are operating in the northeastern states. Although they have varied objectives, all of them justify their presence by pointing out real or perceived discrimination or neglect that they experience as communities within the Indian Union. While some seek solution for their problems by secession from India, others look for greater autonomy or powers for themselves within the Indian Union. In pursuit of their goals, the extremist organizations engage in violent and extra-constitutional means. The influence of such extremist organizations on the functioning of the governments in the northeastern states is discussed in the writings of several scholars like Sanjib Baruah, Samir Kumar Das, E.N. Rama Mohan, H.N. Das, Ajai Sahni, Bhibhu Prasad Routray, etc.<sup>12</sup> By resorting to *bandhs*,

destruction of public property, kidnappings and killings, the militants pose law and order problems in the region. By acting on behalf of particular ethnic communities, they intimidate, kill or terrorize the people belonging to other communities forcing them to leave their land and livelihood. The militants resort to extortion and impose different kinds of 'taxes' to collect funds for their activities. Several militant groups maintain contacts with politicians, businessmen and bureaucrats working over-ground and seek out benefits from different governmental programs and policies for their own benefit. There are instances where militants demanded government contracts for their own men and exploited even Public Distribution System that seeks to supply essential commodities for the poor people. At the time of elections, some militant groups give call for ban on elections, whereas some others openly come in support of their own candidates and parties and force the people to vote for them. In some states the militant groups run parallel governments, making a mockery of the sovereignty of the state and rule of law in the region.

The Indian State tried to meet the challenge of the militants by sending and stationing armed forces in the region. Looking at militancy more as a law and order problem, the governments have resorted to counter insurgency operations. Several black laws were enacted depriving the constitutional rights of the people living in the militancy prone areas. The armed forces were given enormous powers to deal with the people during the anti-insurgency operations. On the other hand, the armed personnel deployed from the mainland India have little knowledge of the peoples and their problems in the region. They treat all people in the region as suspects and anti-nationals. In the unified command areas, the armed forces operate parallel governments and virtually ignore civil authorities and elected governments. The Indian government appoints retired army officials and intelligence officers as governors in these states, as Delhi has little confidence in the people and leaders of the region. Such lack of faith in the state governments is partly the result of the truck that some of the politicians and political parties have with extremist organizations. It is reported that in Manipur many corrupt state politicians and bureaucrats seek the support of militants for their personal gains and in turn reciprocate by arranging finances for militant activities. To fight ULFA, the AGP government in Assam took the help of surrendered ULFA (SULFA) militants and allowed them to move freely with guns and terrorize even the civilian population. Fed up with insurgent and counter-insurgent violence, the people at large are now looking for peace in almost

all states of Northeast India. Realizing the public mood, the governments - both central and state - also started talking of the need for peace and expressing their intentions to enter into negotiations with the extremist groups. But sections within the ruling circles, which have benefited enormously from counter-insurgency business, seem to be working against the peace process, as peace to them means loss.

Thus in their own ways, both militants and the governments in the region are working to throttle democratic governance, denying the people the right to live with dignity, security, freedom and self-respect. By creating a situation where no rule of law and enlightened civil society could operate, both militants and governments have made it impossible for the citizens to avail the benefits of good governance.

#### ***4. Governance and Economic Development***

Many scholars and administrators have studied how governance affects and is in turn affected by economic development in the region.<sup>13</sup> Some scholars have rightly pointed out that the Northeast as a whole lags behind the rest of the country both in terms of economic indicators and Human Development indices. It is only with respect to literacy that it fairs better than the national average. Although the region is rich in resources, they could not be exploited for the benefit of the people and the region. Peripheral location of the region and security concerns of the central government prevented the development of industry in the region. Drawing of the national boundaries prevented the movements of goods and peoples across the national borders, thus closing down traditional cultural and trade outlets of the indigenous communities living in these states bordering Bangladesh and Myanmar. As the region was cut-off from the neighboring countries, all the northeastern states had to depend on supplies from the mainland. Because of high transport costs, the people of Northeast, for no fault of their own, end up shedding more money for commodities that they had to buy. According to some, the legal restrictions imposed on the entry of businessmen from the plains no doubt prevented alienation of tribal lands and resources in the scheduled areas to an extent, but at the same time they also obstructed development of entrepreneurship skills among the local people. There is very little that state governments in the region could do, as all of them are financially dependent on the grants and loans from the central government. The state governments did very little to mobilize their own internal resources. The state leaderships failed to devise appropriate plans and policies for the

development of the region. As most leaders know very little beyond their villages and communities, they could not give birth to alternative development strategies appropriate to the region and blindly followed the directions from the central government. Since most central funds are tied, the states had to implement the central schemes and programs, with little scope for modifications and innovations. Thanks to corrupt politicians and bureaucrats, the possible benefits of such schemes could not reach the poor and the needy. It is often reported in the media that politician-bureaucrat-contractor nexus operating in the northeastern states siphon-off major portions of the funds, leaving little for the poor. The MLA or MP funds are usually misutilised or misdirected towards activities that have little developmental value.<sup>14</sup> Much of the development activities are concentrated in a few urban centers and the villages which are far-off from the local metropolis are left without proper roads, health care, education, sanitation and drinking water facilities. In the absence of strong secondary and tertiary sectors, the increasing poverty and unemployment force the people to cling to primary sector and government jobs for their livelihood. But the limited scope for further development in primary and government sectors is accentuating the competition among people and contributing to intensification of ethnic conflicts in the region.<sup>15</sup>

### **Towards Alternative Concept**

The sorrow state of governance is the cause for all kinds of maladies that actually afflict the northeastern region – poverty, unemployment, underdevelopment, ethnic conflicts and insurgency. From experience it is evident that mere development of infrastructure and pumping of money would not change the state of affairs in the Northeast. The need for better governance in the northeastern states has been recognized and articulated by many scholars and activists. However, the prescriptions that have been suggested for better governance differ, depending on the objectives or goals one sets for good governance.

In Northeast India, apart from neo-liberal ideas that some academicians and policy-makers have been propagating, there appears to be two other dominant perceptions concerning governance. The one, looking at the state of degeneration in public sphere, often tends to romanticize the past and seek solution by reverting back to traditional patterns of governance and empowering the communities. But its advocates overlook the fact that the communities are no more homogenous and the traditional institutions themselves

have undergone considerable changes over the decades. As stated earlier, the people themselves rejected the traditional chief-ship in Mizo Hills. However, it needs to be admitted that the traditional institutions, in whatever form they exist now, do play some important roles in other tribal dominant states in the Northeast. Recently an activist like Hiren Gohain, who is highly critical of the nature of governance in Assam, came out in all praise for developmental activities undertaken in certain Naga villages under the guidance of traditional chiefs.<sup>16</sup> To the extent they are playing positive roles in the community lives, there is no reason why they should be abandoned. Yet, one should realize that traditional institutions basically cater to villages or small localities, inhabited by people belonging to same ethnic communities. But they become problematic in case of governance for bigger administrative-territorial units – districts and states – comprising of thousands and lakhs of people belonging to different classes, communities and regions. These structural limitations make some perceive liberal democracy as the only alternative. Although they admit that the parliamentary institutions are not properly working in the region, still they believe in the possibility of strengthening the liberal institutions, by inculcating the values of individualism, reason, liberalism and democracy to the people. Those persons often forget that in essence liberalism and its institutions are only superstructures of capitalist social-formation. In the absence of a strong and viable capitalist base, one cannot expect the people to accept and acquire political culture compatible with liberal ideologies and institutions. Perverted forms of parliamentary democracy that we see in the Northeast are reflections of a crisis ridden underdeveloped capitalism of peripheral regions. In view of the adverse impact that growth of market and private property had on the vulnerable sections, the victims or the likely victims of development or underdevelopment in the region tend to think and act along community lines, how-so-ever objectionable they might be to the advocates of liberalism. As such there is no solution either ways. Neither the traditional institutions nor the liberal parliamentary establishment could ensure better governance to the region with multiple contradictions. Hence the people concerned about better governance from the point of view of the common people inhabiting the region, it is time one thinks beyond traditional / liberal paradigms of governance. If the interests and aspirations of the marginalized and deprived sections of the region are our major concerns, then one needs to design appropriate parameters and strategies for ensuring good governance.

There is a need to come out with relevant indicators for democratic governance, not so much to influence the governments and the ruling elite, but to

set a possible agenda that could inspire and mobilize the masses in pursuit of their real social needs and at the same time empower them sufficiently to meet the challenges of governance. Such efforts aimed at democratic governance in the region should take into consideration all factors and processes that affect the governance in the region – political institutions, economic development, ethnicity and insurgency. The declared goals of good governance that one seeks should therefore be (i) Guaranteeing social minimum to all people so that they live with dignity and self-respect; (ii) Ensuring peace and security in the region and bringing unity among all sections of the working masses; (iii) Facilitating development of all cultures and languages of the communities inhabiting the region; and (iv) Building up capacities to enable them to enjoy the fruits of freedom.

For pursuing these objectives of good governance, the people should strive to ensure efficient and corruption free administration, which is transparent and accountable to the people. Good governance is not possible without strong and secular leadership that rises above ethnic loyalties. For all communities of people inhabiting the region, there should be appropriate mechanisms to express and seek redressal of public grievances. There is a need for a shift from security related approach to development approach. Efforts should be made to wean away the people from ethnic militant organizations by engaging them in productive works. Even in situations the counter-insurgency operations become absolutely necessary, there is a need to ensure the supremacy of civil administration over the armed wings of the state. The people at grassroots should be encouraged to articulate their needs and come out with plans to realize them. The elected representatives should be pressurized to ensure that people's felt needs and their plans find expression in the form of policies. All development programs and schemes should be implemented by involving the communities at the grassroots. Traditional political institutions could be engaged in the governance process provided they agree to democratize themselves and open up space for women and ethnic minorities. Political autonomy makes little sense as long as the units concerned – whether they be states, districts or villages – become economically self-reliant. Innovative experiments in development are possible, if only the administration in charge of governance is capable of mobilizing internally adequate money, materials and manpower. Community structures can act as social capital in homogenous villages or localities, but in urban and mixed localities there is a need to ensure attention, loyalty and involvement of different communities in developmental activities. Special care should be taken to involve participation of women and ethnic minorities. Since over depen-

dence on primary sector generates ethnic conflicts in the region, it is necessary to develop secondary and tertiary sectors to create alternative sources of employment and livelihood for the people. Land reforms are to be initiated to prevent concentration of land and stop landlessness, especially among the tribes. There should be softening of borders and conscious efforts should be made to encourage mutually beneficial trade and business along the borders. During the interim period, there is a need to ensure community control over land and other resources and make sure that there is no large-scale immigration of laborers into the region. Basic services like education, health care, drinking water, Public Distribution System, transport and communication facilities are to be guaranteed to all poor and needy people. Socially conscious, secular and responsible civil society organizations are to be formed in villages and remote localities to represent the interests of the poor and marginalized sections of the society. An enlightened public sphere needs to be created to engage the people's representatives and the public servants, and to monitor the working of public institutions in charge of governance.

It is true that some of the issues mentioned above are at times raised by intellectuals supporting liberalism and liberalization also. But they expect changes to come from above. On the other hand, given their structural limitations, neither traditional nor liberal elite could do much for changing the present state of governance. As against such top-down approach that passively expects the governments and ruling classes to deliver, the radical democratic vision of governance should aim at educating and organizing the exploited, deprived and marginalized sections of the region and mobilizing them in united secular militant movements for efficient and democratic governance. It is only through the collective movements of people at the grassroots that one could empower the people and at the same time ensure radical changes in the institutions and environment of governance.

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