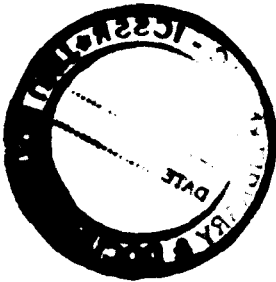


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THE PROCESS OF NATIONAL INTEGRATION IN THE NORTH EAST



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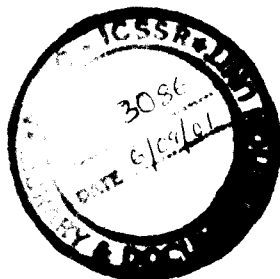
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INTRODUCTION

In popular parlance, the North-eastern region may be described as a miniature India. The composition of the people with a diversified ethno-religious groups in the plains as well as various ancient tribal sects in the hills presents the North-east a colourful demographic picture. The region is rich in forest, mineral and water resources. Agriculture is the backbone of the economic life of the people of the region. Yet our common experience suggests that the pattern of glaring disparity in areas of income and standard of living of the people have become quite phenomenal and is increasing day by day. It is, therefore, no wonder that a paradoxical situation is found to be prevailing in the region in the sense that the condition of acute poverty is being experienced in the midst of enormously rich economic resources. Culturally, the region is characterised by the wide range of diverse traditional cultural mores and yet in spite of the emergence of several present day problems, the essence of the centuries old mutual ties are still being dearly cherished by the people. Hence a more judicious and balanced approach has to be evolved to spell out the nemesis of historico-cultural and eco-political milieu of the region before embarking on a serious discourse over outlining the process of national integration in the North-east.

For several centuries the North-eastern region remains physically isolated from the rest of India. Yet in the annals of history feeble traces of ancient linkages of the region with the mainland India could be found from the days of the Mahabharata when Bhagadatta, the king of Kamarupa, offered both manual and material help and assistance to the Kauravas. Chinese scholar and pilgrim Hiuen Tsang visited the plains of Assam in the first half of the seventh century and depicted a fairly advanced civilization and rich cultural heritage of the region in his narratives. During the medieval period, successive Mughal invasions of Assam were successfully resisted by the Ahom kingdom. But the Burmese invasion in the early part of nineteenth century had forced the Ahom kingdom to seek help from outside the region and thus paved the way of establishing a firm physical link between the region and the mainland India. Physical integration

of the North-east with the rest of India was sealed by the British annexation of the region and by its subsequent colonisation.

The Indian National Congress, the main architect of the freedom struggle against the British colonial rule, had played a pivotal role in building a wide base of national awakening in the North-east. Yet the growth of national consciousness was not uniform in the region due to various historico-political factors and uneven level of socio-economic development. It was however observed that in the post-independence period, an erosion in the base of national consciousness and national unity was experienced due to the rise of fissiparous tendencies in the region which was abetted and reinforced by the growth of insurgency and terrorism.

It is the ethno-cultural aspect which posed a serious hurdle in accelerating the process of intra-cultural integration within the region as well as inter-cultural integration of the region with the rest of India. Ethnic composition and the cultural pattern of the North-eastern region is characterised by their uniqueness and diversity so much so that almost all ethnic groups prefer to remain fiercely independent in preserving their ethno-cultural autonomy and identity. The ethno-cultural complexity of the region seemed to have created a big impediment in the development of a viable unifying link between it and mainstream Indian culture. Further the tendency of the search for self-identity among various ethnic groups is one of the main factors for the development of parochially conceived sub-national consciousness in the region. Therefore, the major and primary quest would be how the distinctiveness of the ethnic culture of the region can best be harmonised with the salience of the mainstream Indian culture.

Another major area of concern in the study of the process of national integration in the North-east is the lack of awareness and apathetic attitude instilled in the psyche of the people of the region to participate in the national political system in a more effective manner. Due to several reasons, the growth of political consciousness in the region was exceedingly slow and tardy which in turn prevented the people to actively motivate and orient themselves in national politics. In this context it would be pertinent to examine the social background of the political leadership of the region as well as their attitude and role in moulding public opinion toward the development

of a cohesive national integration in the North-east.

Apart from the necessity of moulding favourable public opinion, other important vehicles and machineries which can stimulate a favourable and positive climate to accelerate the integrative process in the North-east are also required to be thoroughly examined. In this context the role played by various governmental and non-governmental agencies and non-official media and also the role of different interest and pressure groups, kishan unions, woman organisations, students associations, etc. are re-considered to be vital in augmenting the process as well as in addressing the problems of national integration in the North-east.

It is a widely perceived view that emotional and psychological integration among the population of a nation is possible only when a balanced economic development takes place throughout the country and the fruits of the economic development are shared by the people living in different regions on equal footing. In this context the examination of different developmental constraints as well as the requirement of framing suitable models of economic development for the North-east is considered to be an urgent necessity so that the region can be brought to the level of other developed regions of the country. The core problems of development of the region are unparallelly unique. For a better comprehension an indepth study has to be made to clear the embroiled situation posed by various bottlenecks in the developmental sector in the North-east like the problems of transport and communication facilities, banking, credit and marketing facilities, generation of a favourable climate conducive for attracting capital and investment to facilitate rapid growth of industrialisation of the area as well as to accelerate the pace of development in the field of agro-based industries etc.

The pattern of centre-state fiscal relationship is one such important area which can lend credibility in shaping and strengthening an integrative process. Any aberration in the proper format of centre-state fiscal relationship in the federal polity may cause enough constraint to hinder the development of the process of national integration. A thorough examination of the centre-state fiscal relations in the post-independence era has, therefore, to be made in the light of growing and ever increasing feeling of

deprivation and alienation in the minds of the people of the North east. This apart, the study should also include a thorough inquiry into the causes, reasons and depth of the feeling of the people against the step-motherly treatment shown by the Centre towards the North-east which is considered to be a major obstacle in cementing and augmenting emotional integration of the region with the rest of the country.

The unique geographical location has itself exerted tremendous strain on the consolidation of the national integrative process in the North-east. Its geographical location has found to be a major barrier to attract substantial amount of capital and investment necessary for the development of the region. The typical topographical conditions of the North-east can easily be gauged from its special geographical identity where the unique geographical features are typified by hill-terrain, steep slopes, high rainfall, recurring floods in both Brahmaputra and Surama basins, severe erosion in river banks, traditional modes and patterns of shifting cultivation (criss-cross pattern or zoom) vis-a- vis bench terracing cultivation etc.

Yet another relevant factor considered vital in the understanding of the process of national integration is the study of the changing pattern of demographic character in the North-eastern units of our federal polity accentuated by the trans-border migration having a profound impact on the economic condition of the people. It is to be noted that the North-eastern region is strategically located and surrounded by long and extensive international border and hence the maintenance of national security in the region has become a primary national concern. Against this backdrop an inquiry into the operational viability of the core-periphery conceptual model as well as the study on the possibility of enlarging the scope of inter-border trade and commerce to boost economic foundation of the region will be helpful in fostering and enriching the knowledge of the process of national integration in the North-east.