

# Editorial

Monday, May 28, 2018

## From Looking to acting the East Policy : Is a fair game going on?

The long cherish dream of of getting benefit through the opening of the Indo-Myanmar border trade still fails to serve its purpose. Almost all trades are on illegal goods and those with licence legitimate traders are not showing much interest as the authority who were supposed to improve the condition still fails to show and translate into action to what they promise.

A noted scholar Edmund Downie once wrote in this paper that Cross-border transit infrastructure deficits are a major drag on India-Myanmar trade. Redressing this issue on the Indian side will require substantial investment, especially in railways and roads, the most natural channels for large-volume trading in this region.

In the railway sector, such efforts are ongoing, but progress is slow. A November 2014 presentation by India-ASEAN connectivity expert Prabir De suggests that efforts to connect Imphal to India's railway map, initiated in 2003, are slated to be completed by March 2018.

An extension from Imphal to Moreh, likewise set in motion during the mid-2000s, finished its engineering survey only this year, according to the Bangkok Post; and links from Moreh into Myanmar are further off.

For roads, at least, the basic infrastructure of trade already exists. Manipur connects to mainland India via two major highways. National Highway 102 (NH-102) is the extension of AH-1; it goes northwards into central Assam. National Highway 37 (NH-37) runs westwards into southern Assam. These two highways are essential not just for overland trade to Myanmar, but also for providing Manipur with the rice, petrol, cement, and other basic commodities which the state imports from other parts of India. However, both highways are plagued by shoddy construction, especially NH-37: Even in the dry season, traveling the 220 km from Imphal to Jiribam on Manipur's western border can take 13-14 hours.

The border trading environment itself is characterized by a combination of weak basic infrastructure and byzantine bureaucratic procedures.

In 2006, central government authorities approved the development of an Integrated Check Post (ICP) at Moreh - a single complex for border management authorities, intended to improve inter-agency coordination and it still under construction.

A 2011 report on border infrastructure at Moreh suggested that maintenance of current customs facilities had dropped off since ICP development began. Such deficits work against the sort of professionalized trading operations that Delhi policymakers seek to encourage, and in fact, the vast majority of Moreh's trade goes through informal and illegal channels.

Official statistics for these channels do not exist - both publicly available and in my own conversations with experts in Manipur - indicate that the annual volumes moving through each of these channels today stands somewhere in the billions to tens of billions of rupees, far above the hundreds of millions of rupees in annual formal trade.

Indeed, the volume of informal trade can be understood to indicate the mismatch between the infrastructure of formal trade and the demand for trade at Moreh. Informal trade here consists primarily of "headload trade" - goods carried across the border on one's head, which are largely exempted from standard customs procedures. But much of this trade is actually coordinated by high-volume traders, who hire large armies of coolies to carry goods across the border.

Prof. Ch. Priyaranjan Singh, an economist at Manipur University, says that, of the forty traders who obtained licenses to operate at Moreh's formal customs station upon its establishment in 1995, just three still use them.

With the kind of delayed the Imphal-Moreh trade is going on illegal goods more than the legitimate goods. Above all Manipur still felt that are the promises made under the Act East Policy will be benefitted the people of this region or are they waiting for multi crore traders of the mainland to find a way by suppressing the local traders - a question to be pondered .

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## Northeast : Issues at Stake-2

The write up reproduce here is an excerpt from the lecture delivered by renowned Journalist Manas Choudhuri on the Arambam Somorendra Memorial Lecture on June 10, 2008. First part was of this lecture was published on May 26 issue here in this column

### Brain Drain

A phenomenon that bothers me equally, if not more, is the seemingly endless flight of our intellectual capital from the region to the rest of the country. Today, we are certain to see our young men and women in the metros and other major cities of the country seeking a place in the sun. They either are pursuing their academic careers or have taken up gainful engagements. Either way, most of them end up becoming a part of the local milieu and generally happily so. While it may be a great idea for our national integration, I have a different take on the entire issue of migration from the Northeast. Let me expatiate.

In 2007, I came across of group of young college students, belonging to the Khasi community of Meghalaya, in Kolkata. It transpired that, of the six boys, two belonged to West Khasi Hills, which is a relatively underdeveloped area of the State. These two were enrolled in colleges in Kolkata, one of them in first year B.A. and the other in Pre-University. Considering that they bypassed Shillong and chose Kolkata for completing general education, it intrigued me a lot. On being asked, they told me that "Kolkata offers more career options than Shillong", adding with a stamp of pragmatism that "it was better to move out early in life".

Indeed, few can contest the fact that we have been able to create only limited options for our youth in the region today. It is a stark collective failure. I have no complaint over some youths migrating to the metros. All the same, if most of our bright and brilliant brains settle down in other States, the Northeast will become that much poorer. Take into account the investment on each youth, the sense of loss will be bigger. However, when the youths argue that "brain drain is better than brain in the drain", you are stumped.

The bottomline is that the Northeast must take its manpower planning seriously and create a conducive atmosphere for attracting private investment before long. That will help substantially in creating job opportunities locally and check this disturbing trend. After all, if all our bright minds and brains desert the region, we will eventually have to manage things with the mediocre set that decides to stay back for whatever reason. As a result, we will be multiplying mediocrity many times over.

### Planned to Fail

One other issues high on my

list of concern for the Region is the complete lack of a road map for a concerted approach for and towards development. I do not recall having seen or heard of a Master Plan drawn up by any State for its holistic growth. The Northeastern States seem to be sleep-walking eyes shut, not in control and unconscious of the very purpose of this journey. I don't know for sure, but my guess is that most of the States have no policy relating to the core issues before them.

In Meghalaya, I can safely say that the State has no policy framework on Education, Health, Industry, Manpower, Mining etc. which have a great bearing on the progress of the State. Only recently the government has inked a Policy on Power. Although, there are some grey areas in the document, we can at least say that we have managed to frame one. The State is presently engaged in formulating a Policy in other key sectors. Hopefully, within the current year, some of these will see the light of the day.

A prime reason for this vacuum is that the State Planning Boards have failed to deliver. In most of the Northeastern States, the Planning Boards have been converted into a rehabilitation ground for "Failed Politicians". The ruling side makes it a point to pack the State Planning Board with MLAs and MPs who have been rejected by the people. Part-time planners may be fully rehabilitated, but at what cost? I believe that if we have failed to plan, we have virtually planned to fail.

The NE States need to do some serious soul searching on this. In my opinion all the States should attach highest priority to Planning. It is high time for the State Planning Boards to try and associate with some of the experts and brilliant minds with proven track record and a pragmatic vision to add muscle to the Planning Boards and thereby provide a blueprint for development.

I am happy to state that in this regard, Meghalaya has stolen a march over other States. Our new Government is in the process of making a paradigm shift. For the first time, the State Planning Board will have hand-picked experts from rest of the country blended with local thinking minds who have their fingers on the pulse of the people.

### No Common Forum

The Northeast has failed to create a platform for articulating some of the common problems and issues before the region.

Under the present dispensation, barring our State Assemblies and our MPs in Delhi, the region has no Constitutional forum for addressing these issues. Our voice is seldom heard in Parliament, outnumbered as we are in the din and bustle of the Parliament. Even though we have had "our own" representatives in the successive Union Governments, I feel the real voice of the people is inadequately echoed in the corridors of power in Delhi.

In fact, come to think of it, barring the Northeastern MPs' Forum in Delhi and the North Eastern Council, the region has no known forum which can serve as a common meeting ground for the Seven States. For all practical purposes, the MPs' Forum has become a victim of party politics and virtually defunct due to a clash of political interests. This has stood in the way of periodic meetings, let alone creating consensus on matters of vital common interest. Even the NEC has turned out to be no better than a veritable milch cow. Governors and Chief Ministers make a bee line to the Council with long shopping lists, but seldom, if ever, consider their obligation to articulate the angst and aspirations of the peoples.

Consequently, during the last three and half decades, there has been no consensus on matters like influx of foreigners, evolving a common strategy for regional development, our trade relations with neighbouring countries etc. This absence of a meeting ground needs to be addressed by the region if we are to break the shackles of inertia which has been our hallmark.

Viewed against this backdrop, and in the context of the ongoing dialogue for a peace package, I am of the opinion that the Northeast should have its own Parliament a la European Union Parliament, having proportionate representation from the States. This will certainly provide the region with a constitutionally sanctioned permanent forum to take up issues relevant for its advancement.

To my mind, the experiment with the Northeast so far has produced only mixed results. Our own lack of vision for the region has resulted in New Delhi pushing schemes here which are incompatible with our needs. The one-shoe-fits-all attitude of the Planning Commission has only succeeded in alienating people from those schemes and, worse, it has created little pockets of affluence amidst disgraceful

levels of poverty, which is both palpable and visible. One of the many reasons for armed uprisings in the region can be attributed to this shocking disparity in income levels and the very rapid land alienation and the erosion of communal ownership and the 'privatization of the commons'. Further, the absence of a land use policy in the region has resulted in the alienation of prime agricultural land to commercial crops. This is bound to lead to an agrarian crisis in the near future.

But all these problems are compounded due to our own lack of imagination and planning by ourselves, for ourselves. It should be an eye opener to us in the region that we have only just crafted a 'vision document' stating where we wish to locate the Northeast by the year 2020. How is it that in all these years we never thought of a vision for ourselves? It is but natural then that we should be groping in the dark. To my mind, the Vision 2020 document to which all the eight chief ministers had recently appended their signatures to, is one way of taking things forward. Our region also has to grapple with the Look East Policy which has several implications since this Policy requires a multi-pronged approach involving several central ministries. At the moment, there is absolute incoherence and lack of understanding as to what this Policy envisages for the Northeast. While the policy is essentially driven by New Delhi, we in the Northeast need to have a clear road map as to how we see it impinging on our socio-cultural, socio-political and socio-economic ethos. Trade routes through the region will have both positive and negative fallouts. It is through our collective wisdom that we can minimize the negative effects and leverage on the positives. All these, of course, require constant dialogue among the planners, thinkers: politicians and academia of the Northeast. It is imperative that we have such a platform before the storm of "Delhi-propelled development", which is ignorant of the ground realities here, blows us and our dreams apart.

We can only learn from our past experiences to equip the peoples of the region to take on the challenges of the 21st Century. It is my firm conviction that the Northeast is still a sleeping giant and, once it is awakened, it will take its destined position among the winners.

I hope and pray that my dreams for the region come true.

## Dinner Table University

A short story by Anil Chandra

I once read the interesting story of an immigrant Italian family in America where the father had converted the dinner table into a university. When the father was growing up in northern Italy at the turn of the century, education was for the rich. Father was the son of a poor farmer.

He was taken from school in the fifth standard and put to work. He made the world his school. He was interested in everything. He read all the books, magazines and newspapers. He loved to listen to the town elders and learn all about the world. He carried his respect for learning to America, where he emigrated and later passed it on to his family. He was determined

that none of his many children were denied an education.

He believed that the greatest sin was to go to bed at night as ignorant as when one awoke. "Though we are born stupid, only the stupid remain that way," he'd say.

He insisted that each of his children learn at least one new thing each day. And dinner time was the forum for sharing what each had learnt that day.

After food was served and initial eating done, he would pull back his chair, pour a glass of red wine, light up a cigar, inhale deeply, exhale and stare hard at all his children.

This always had a slightly

unsettling effect on the children as they stared back at him, awaiting for him to say something, and then his attention would settle on one of them. "Felice," he'd say, "tell me what you learnt today."

The result was that each of the children would pour into an encyclopedia during the day and would come up with an answer like "the population of Venezuela is " There would be a short discussion like "how many men and how many females," and then the next child would be asked a question. No dinner ended without the children having been enlightened by at least half a dozen such facts.

The son who wrote this story

stated that in retrospect, "I realised what a dynamic educational technique Papa was offering us. Without being aware of it, our family was growing together, sharing knowledge and participating in one another's education."

I write this story so that those Papas who value learning can emulate this great '5th standard passed Papa' and bring into the life of their children knowledge, love, togetherness and the realization that in life not a day need be wasted. After all, one never can tell when knowing the population of Venezuela may prove useful.