

Social Sector Development in North-East India:

Problems, Issues and Challenges



Council for Social Development



Indian Council of
Social Science Research

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Report

A two-day international seminar on “Social Sector Development in North-East India: Problems, Issues and Challenges” was organised by the Council for Social Development (CSD), on the occasion of the birth anniversary of its founder, Durgabai Deshmukh, at India International Centre, New Delhi, on July 15-16, 2019.

More than 50 experts on issues related to North-East India participated in the event that was sponsored by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR). The deliberations focussed on different aspects of social sector development of North-East India with the objective of formulating a roadmap for social sector development in the region.

In his welcome address at the inaugural session of the seminar, Prof. Ashok Pankaj, Director, CSD, observed that adequate attention has not been given to social sector development in North-East India. Highlighting two important characteristics of Social Development in North-East India viz. (a) relatively high level of social sector development even with low per capita income, and (b) pronounced inter-state and intra-state variations, he pointed out that these have not been examined properly and adequately.

Chairing the inaugural session, the CSD President, Prof. Muchkund Dubey, mentioned that North-East India, which is no longer geographically isolated from the rest of the country, should take advantage of its wider access. The Central Government is also according due importance to North-East in the fiscal layout and planning process. It would be interesting

for the social researcher to examine observe the pace of social sector development in the region under the new regime.

In his inaugural speech, Prof. Mrinal Miri, former Vice-Chancellor of North-East Hill University, while dwelling on the magnitude of the cultural diversity in North-East India, wondered whether the modern state had the ability to accommodate the plurality of the region. Citing evidences of economic dependence of the region on other parts of the country, he expressed the view that “the economic integration of North-East India with its eastern neighbours may bring culturally depressed consequences to the region.”

Prof. Atul Sarma, Distinguished Professor, CSD, while noting that the importance of North-East India for the Centre lay in its strategic location, lamented that the social sector development of the region has been perennially neglected. Even so, he observed that while a few social sector development indicators such as literacy, infant mortality in the region were far ahead of the all India average. However, in terms of various social development indicators, there was huge variability across space, the tribes, the ethnic and the different religious groups. Prof. Sarma was optimistic that following two days of deliberations at the seminar, the participants would bring out the extent of attainment of different dimensions of human development in the region and that the seminar would draw up a roadmap for social sector development in North-East India.

Technical Session: I

Ethnic Diversity and Demography

The session, which was chaired by Prof. Virginus Xaxa, a former Professor in the Department of Sociology, University of Delhi, contextualised the ethnic diversity of the North-East, while reiterating the idea that North-East is not a homogenous block as it is usually made out to be.

The keynote paper was delivered by Prof. Chandan Kumar Sharma from the Dept. of Sociology, Tezpur University. He provided a historic, demographic and geographic description of the states in the North-East region. He detailed the series of migrations in the region, which made it a cusp wherein people from both South-East Asia and South Asia converged. It was observed that whereas a few tribal communities were transnational in nature, non-tribal communities were either natives or migrants from other parts of the nation. These communities have been historically characterised by their own distinctive livelihoods, habitats, culture, religion, etc. It was in this context he mentioned that the diversity had a strong bearing on the social development of the communities, in particular, and the region, in general.

The keynote paper was followed by three presentations. The presentation by Prof. Binod Khadria focussed on the Assamese diaspora either returning to the state or establishing bases in the places they had relocated to contribute towards the

social upliftment of their home state. The underlying idea of this presentation was to point out the underdeveloped infrastructure in the North-East India which, initially, led to the flight of these people and the inflow of remittances, technology and human capital currently to develop the infrastructure. The second and third presentations, by Prof. Bimal Kumar Kar, Department of Geography, Gauhati University and Md. Syed Salimuddin, Research Scholar, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), respectively, highlighted, through data, the diversity of the region. Prof. Kar highlighted the complex and unique demographic character of North-east India, which was said to be different from the rest of the country. It was pointed out that the region was characterised by high rates of population growth which have, since 1901, always exceeded the country's overall growth rates due to the large volume of migration from within and outside the country. He also dwelt on the issue of declining Hindu and tribal populations in a few states of North-East India. The last presentation emphasised an action-oriented research aimed at highlighting the issues which could be useful for planners to initiate the desired action for growth. The session concluded on the note that while statistical analysis was pertinent, one also needed to look into the faces behind the numbers in order to understand the actual scenario of social sector development in the North- East India.

Technical Session: II

Status of Education

This session was chaired by Prof. R. Govinda, Distinguished Professor, CSD. The presentations were made by three speakers, who articulated the distinctive challenges of education in north-east India.

Dr. Nirmali Goswami from the Department of Sociology, Tezpur University, highlighted the difficulties in understanding the complexities of the North-East, with particular reference to the status of education. She attempted to historicise the development of formal education in the region as an important appraisal of the educational indicators of the eight states of north-east India. She flagged the issue of minimal governmental interventions towards education of the masses and steady influences of missionary education as contributing towards creation of a curious pattern of educational development in the different north-east states. She sought to throw light on some of the region-specific issues like greater educational autonomy in matters related to the medium of instruction in schools, with focus on the development of school markets. Finally, she suggested that researchers should closely examine various indicators of social development to avoid easy generalisation about the region, which tended to stratify and ignore its heterogeneity compared with other Indian states outside the region.

Ms. Jayashree Doley, an M.Phil student from the University of Delhi, highlighted the Universal Elementary Education practices among the Mishing Tribes of Assam. She attributed the low literacy rate among the Mishing community to the neglect of mass education. Other noteworthy factors that affect the educational attainment are; they have to face the perennial problem of displacement due to floods. Besides, during the monsoons, the children have to swim across the river to reach their schools, even though this posed a big threat to their lives. Such factors resulted in the migration of Mishing tribe to cities and towns in search of better educational opportunities. However, considering that education alone might not be able to fulfil their aspirations and hopes, Mishing youths, were motivated to migrate to other big cities outside the state in search of better jobs and opportunities.

Speaking of the relationship between education and human trafficking, Shri. L.D. Mishra, former Secretary, Government of India raised the issues of access, equity, and participation of trafficked students in education. He pointed out that the occupation of the school buildings by the repressive state apparatus (the military) hindered the access to education of children in north-east India. Before concluding, Sh. Mishra posed the pertinent question as to what mattered more, people's security or national security?

Technical Session: III

Status of Health

The session was chaired by Prof. Imrana Qadeer, Distinguished Professor of CSD, who made some introductory remarks. The keynote paper was presented by Dr. Nemthiangai Guite from the Centre of Social Medicine and Community Health, School of Social Sciences, JNU. Dr Guite, in her paper, identified a number of problems in the health sector of the North-Eastern states. Among them were shortage of trained medical manpower, issue of access to sparsely populated, remote and far-flung areas, need for improvement of governance in the health sector and the need for improving quality of health service provided. The other issues identified were the need for effective and timely utilisation of existing facilities, morbidity and mortality due to malaria, high levels of tobacco consumption and the associated high risk of cancer, and high incidence of HIV/AIDS in Nagaland and Manipur and its increasing incidence in Mizoram and Meghalaya. At the same time, it was pointed out that the region was rich in biodiversity, with its people adopting traditional health practices in the absence of modern health services. This positive aspect of the region needs to be tapped and promoted as a livelihood option. Maternal and child health, increasing incidence of violence against women due to armed conflict and drug abuse were listed as some of the on-going and emerging health concerns specific to the region.

Prof. Sushanta Nayak of the Department of Economics, Rajiv Gandhi University presented the next paper on “Access to Education and Health services in North-East India” that focussed on the enrolment of students from primary to higher education. The paper identified various factors that contributed to the inter-state variations of the region in the formal education sector. The infrastructure of the educational institutions, the number of students per teacher and the area earmarked per school for infrastructure were taken into account for the analysis. The paper further discussed the accessibility of health care services in the region while indicating that poor maintenance of records hindered access

to such service.

Nikita Gupta’s paper analysed the factors that determine the health indicators and the variations in the determinants of health for the North-Eastern states from NFHS-3 and NFHS-4 data. She explained how the literacy rate, sex ratio and the budgetary allocations impact the number of people availing services from the private sector and, thus, the differential health outcomes in a region. Referring to poverty as another hindrance, she said that on account of low income, the poor households often compromised on their health care needs. It was also indicated that traditional health practices were perceived to be producing mixed results, but the same also varied substantially across different regions.

Benjamin Debbarma, a Ph.D Scholar from JNU, focussed on “the socio-economic correlation of substance abuse among the male adults in North-East India with particular reference to Tripura”. It was pointed out that both production and consumption of alcohol was higher in the North-East region as compared to the national average. . However, consumption of alcohol and smoking were acceptable in the region because of the traditional and cultural connotation associated with these habits.

The discussions in the session were very stimulating. Referring to the paper presented earlier by Mr. Debbarma, Prof. Kalyan Das of the Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change, Guwahati pointed out that it had focussed on the fact that despite significant increase in tobacco consumption, production of tobacco had been declining. He wondered as to what were the factors responsible for such a paradoxical situation. Could it be the market factor or the initiatives? Prof. Das contended that the decline in production and rise in tobacco consumption was due to farmers being given incentives to withdraw from tobacco cultivation.

Prof. Das also submitted that the proportion of disabled people was the highest in the state of Manipur among the NE states and this was in fact

higher than the national average. He wondered whether this aspect could be linked to conflict.

According to Prof. Virginius Xaxa, historically speaking, in so far as the tribal communities of North-East India are concerned, infant mortality rate was never regarded as a problem in the region, perhaps because among the tribal population, mother's milk is continued for a long period. However, the major issue relates to the increase in the incidence of under-five mortality on account of poverty-related malnutrition. Generally speaking, he mentioned that IMR is not an issue for tribal society, Prof. Nayak, at the same time, pointed out that as per the Human Development Report of Arunachal Pradesh, 2005, IMR was quite high in the inaccessible regions of Arunachal Pradesh.

Prof. Sanjoy Hazarika, who made some observations regarding the presentations made in the session. According to him, while the non-tribals comprised two-thirds of the population in the region, the share of the tribals was only one-third.

In so far as land was concerned, it was indicated that two-thirds of it was under tribal occupation i.e. inhabited by the tribal/ indigenous population. Prof. Hazarika also highlighted the role of Boat Clinics as a successful health service delivery mechanism, based on the PPP model, initiated for the benefit of deprived communities of the regions, particularly during floods.

Prof. Imrana Qadeer, the chairperson of the session concluded with the observation that everyone has treated North-East India in their own way. The British exploited the region for extracting resources from its land to add to their own wealth, The post-colonial Indian state did have concerns about the borders even though it never talked about what the army had done to the local people or about the health of women and children in the region. Today, a certain kind of development is being promoted in the marginalised region. She made an appeal to those working in this region to look beyond statistics.

Technical Session: IV

Poverty

The session was chaired by Prof. Amitabh Kundu, formerly at Centre for the Study of Regional Development, School of Social Sciences, JNU.

The keynote speaker for the session was Dr. Rakhee Bhattacharjee from the Special Centre for the Study of North-East India, JNU. In her paper titled “Understanding poverty in North-East India-Going beyond Numbers and knowing the margins”, she viewed the issues of poverty in North-East India in a comprehensive way and from a macro perspective. India’s North-East was one such noteworthy instance wherein income poverty shot up tremendously in 2011-12 as compared to other parts of the country. The data on both high intra and inter-regional variation in poverty levels in the North-East calls for serious debate and attention not only on income but also on the multi-dimensional aspect incorporating various important social indicators. She argued that with various neo-liberal developmental projects over the last 25 years, newer proliferation of deprivation has happened in India, especially in resource-rich regions like the North-East, where large numbers have been marginalized and have lost their livelihoods due to encroachment and appropriation of resources. The impact of such marginalisation can be understood well with the analysis of multi-dimensional poverty, which, so far, has not been captured well. Dr. Bhattacharjee emphasised the need to look beyond (income) poverty numbers and focus instead on multi-dimensional issues including human security in North-East.

The second paper of the session was presented by Ms. Antora Borah on behalf of Dr. Rajashree Bedmatta and Ms. Mahsina Rahman. Titled “Contribution of Flood based welfare programmes to household food security in rural Assam”, the paper was based on the fieldwork undertaken in two villages of rural Assam in the two districts of Dhubri and Jorhat. The presentation sought to emphasise that the rural households of Assam require continuous public support through food-based interventions in order to provide household-level food security. Finally,

apart from highlighting the continuing importance of food-based welfare programmes to household food security, the presentation showed PDS in Assam following a unique form of geographical target, leading to multiple forms of targeting errors and information distortions. Therefore what is needed is administrative reforms at various levels.

At the end of the session, Shri. L.D. Misra raised a few pertinent questions on the accessibility and affordability of the public distribution system. Citing M.S. Swamitnathan’s Food Atlas, 2000 that classified Assam as a deficit state, he wanted to know as to what major changes were needed to be undertaken to overcome the deficit. He also voiced concern on the cultural acceptability of the foodgrains distributed through the Public Distribution System.

Ms. Patricia Mukheim too raised the important issue about the recognition of cultural sensitivity in food distribution systems as the same was lacking in the current PDS. The session elicited comments and observations on the need for a broader definition of poverty in the North-East so as to capture the nuances of the problem in the region. The session identified the issue of poverty in North-East India as a complex one wherein the rate of growth did not necessarily lead to a reduction in the poverty levels.

Prof. Nayak drew attention to two important issues of poverty relating to North-East India. He expressed concern about the absence of a separate price line for the hilly region in North-East India, as the price line of Assam is taken as the basis for calculating the poverty in the hill regions. The second concern of Prof. Nayak was that of higher dependency on Common Property Resource (CPR) in North-East India. Commenting on the presentation, he observed that there are methodological problems in computing the poverty figures of North-East India. These are: a) Consumption expenditure data do not include items obtained from common property resources, and b) there are a large numbers of scattered and inaccessible households which are neither counted by NSSO nor by Census. Since

most of the households were extremely poor, their inclusion in the sample households would further increase the poverty figures.

Kalyan Das raised a methodological question about expenditure on liquor which is not counted in monthly per-capita expenditure. Incidentally, the expenditure on consumption of liquor is considerably high in the North-Eastern states, even though it does not add nutritional value. He also brought up the issue of growing population resulting in shortage of foodgrains. This could be a serious problem unless the foodgrain productivity was increased commensurate with the increasing requirement.

Dr. Rakhee Bhattacharya submitted that till 1990, she had not found any consumer price data at the state level. Consequently, she had to refer to the data of Assam since it is treated as a representative state for the entire region. Under the circumstances, the poverty figures were erroneous and faulty most of the time. It was indicated that since 2000, household consumption data are available and the calculation of poverty estimates is done on the basis of consumption data as provided by the NSSO even though their reliability is still questionable.

Referring to the North-East as a food deficit region, she said that agriculture there was mostly subsistent in nature, with surplus production being absent. The agricultural practices of North-East India like *Jhum* or shifting cultivation do not

leave any scope for surplus production. The region had its own mechanism of distribution of its food through the CPR system. The advent of aspects of modernisation, food adaptability and the changing food habits, led to emergence of issues of food deficit and resultant poverty. At the policy level, the government is making efforts to increase agricultural productivity by bringing about policy changes and through surplus production.

Speaking about multi-dimensional poverty, Prof. Kundu mentioned that India had reduced the same to a substantial extent in one dimension. For instance, the percentage of girls reporting pregnant at the age of 18 has witnessed a remarkable decline. NFHS 4 data had indicated that the numbers of those who reported even being a mother or becoming pregnant have gone down from 24 to 11 per cent.

The chairperson further pointed out that the performance of the North-East region in terms of literacy and enrolment at the primary, secondary and even higher secondary levels was not very bad. However, enrolment of both boys and girls for higher and technical education was much less than the national average. Though educationally the North-East is developed, this is only at a certain level. It is also noteworthy that a lot of people move out for education. What are the factors leading to out-migration of people? Is it due to higher education? Gender disparity is evident from the analysis of enrolment of girls in higher and technical education.

Technical Session: V

Unemployment and Out-migration

The session was chaired by Prof. K.B. Saxena, Distinguished Professor, Council for Social Development, New Delhi while the key paper was presented by Prof. Kalyan Das, OKDISC, Guwahati. Prof. Kalyan Das outlined the reasons for the exodus of people from North-East region to other cities for work. He discussed the aspects of destinations and nature of jobs, remittance and well-being, and other social costs of migrations. The paper finally recommended some measures for promoting employment in the local areas.

Prof. Kalyan Das pointed out that most of those migrating from the region were for short-duration, with their migration period being for an average of two to three years. According to his findings, migrants saved money with which they started their own enterprise at their native place. In this context, it was felt that the lack of proper policy and regulation relating to self-employment in the

North-East region could hinder the prospects of self-employment there.

The next presentation was by Witna Marak, a Ph.D Candidate of TISS, Mumbai, on “Employment Generation through Micro-entrepreneurship (Micro Enterprise) Development”. While indicating that most of the tribal women were engaged in subsistence farming through Jhum cultivation (with their own human resource and tools), he said promotion of commercial crops like rubber in the region in the post -1990s liberalisation era adversely impacted the livelihood of lower income households. In contrast, it helped the elite class to enjoy the huge chunk of share of profit from the changing occupation and market structure.

In his concluding remarks, Prof. K.B. Saxena underlined the dire need of co-ordination between different institutions to generate adequate livelihood in the region.

Technical Session: VI

Governance and Service Delivery

Chairing the session, Mr. P.P. Srivastav, a retired civil servant, emphasised the need for governance to be in tune with the cultural heritage of the people who are being governed. Observing that the North-East region has a rich value system, especially among the tribal society, with features like honesty, transparency, and the great quality of being able to subordinate personal interests to that of the community.

In his presentation, Prof. Saundariya Borbora, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT, Guwahati argued in favour of contextualising the idea of governance in developing countries. While the effort to define governance is an on-going task and is a challenge for the governments in developing countries, he said that mis-governance is an area of concern for such countries. With reference to the North-East region, he spoke of the lack of transparency, accountability in the local governments: the Panchayati Raj Institutions and Autonomous District Councils. Governance institutions were full of scams and corruption leakages, he said while highlighting mis-governance in the region as a factor that constrained service delivery and good governance. Underlining the importance of the significant role played by Information and Communication Technology (ICT), he voiced the need for structural reforms in India to come up with initiatives to have more positive outcomes of ICT that are performance-based rather than merely process-based.

Prof. K.B. Saxena dwelt on the constraints and limitations of governance in the region where the constitutional structures have been undermined by policies, practices and economy. According to him, governance in the region is not same as in other states. It operates in a complex terrain which is multi-layered and multifaceted in which various forces operate through which the government structure has to negotiate. The existing government structure in North-East India is a historical and has not evolved naturally from its traditional social structure, political/organizations aspirations and requirements. It is characterized by “efficiency paradigm” which

is a legacy of colonial architecture of governance. It was further pointed out that this colonial structure of governance was hierarchical and bureaucratic in nature with elaborate systems of checks, control and regulations. The post-colonial state retained this structures and its underlying paradigm with the only difference that the apex decision making authority was elected and development was added to it. Therefore, it was a product of society but an external implant. Another argument advanced was the inter relationship between conflict and governance where the conflicts are caused by policies and practices external to these states as also strategies devised to deal with these North-East states in such a situation become a remote entity incapable of solving their problems. North-East states are also marginalised geographically, demographically and financially. They are locked in asymmetric relations of power with Central Government and have therefore little bargaining power. He argued that the region suffered because of an obsessive concern with security and integration. In respect of security, it was pointed out that the deployment of security personnel was dis-proportionate to the legitimate needs of the region. The security concerns override decision of the formal elected governments through the instrumentality of Governor. This structure diminishes democracy and this delinks the state from the society. The other issue Prof. Saxena spoke of in respect of security perspective was that of counter insurgency operations which are directly controlled by the Central government and render state governments powerless. The integration that he talked of is the footprint of nationalizing State in everyday space where diversity is suspect. He argued that conflicts have arisen between the state processes and community processes leading to ethnic assertion and local political governments are seen by people as incapable of addressing their grievances. As a result, private militias of insurgent groups operate and have social support. In such a situation no effective and responsive governance is made possible in the region.

Dr. Thongkhohal Haokip from the Centre for the Study of Law and Governance, JNU, New Delhi, in his paper titled 'Autonomous Regions and Governance of Minority Groups: The Need for Formation of Regional Councils in North East India', proposed the revival of regional councils in the North-East region. In his presentation, he briefly talked about four main themes viz. Autonomy and self-rule, Mechanisms of governing mechanisms, Categories of Minorities, and Politics of recognition.

He discussed the provisions in the Sixth schedule of the Indian Constitution for the formation of autonomous regions and regional councils in districts having multiple scheduled tribes, and stressed on the formation of such regional councils for smaller ethnic groups within the district. In the process of formation of district councils and regional councils in the erstwhile hill areas of Assam, minority groups within the scheduled districts were neglected, thereby largely ignoring the presence of multiple groups within the district and the issues of their governance. In recent decades, such groups have been engaged in militant activities and have destabilised the whole governance mechanisms in the area in which they operate. The paper viewed the formation of regional councils for such ethnic minorities within the districts

as 'a conflict management device' and a path towards peace and development in the North-Eastern region.

Patricia Mukhiem's message in the session was very strong and, indeed, very apt. She said, "I would want to plead: please don't romanticise or patronise the people of the NE. They are equally venal as everyone in the rest of the country or in the world. Our institutions are crumbling because the people in the region are tottering because of the greed."

She drew attention to the coal mines of the region where exploitation was rampant. While speaking about workers getting trapped in those coal mines, she wondered as to how people could argue in the Supreme Court for abandoning the search for those trapped in the rat holes. How can we call such people kind and generous and without greed and guile, she asked.

Highlighting the security structure of the region, Prof. Saxena expressed surprise at the presence of so many uniformed personnel vis a vis the civilian population. Manipur has approximately 55000 uniformed personnel against a population of 27 lakhs. Every time there was an outbreak of violence and disturbance, the state government would seek the deployment of central forces instead of trusting the local police.

Special Lecture

The special lecture was delivered by Prof. Sanjoy Hazarika, Director of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, who observed, at the outset, that “the researcher’s life is in the field and not in the classroom”. According to Prof. Hazarika, innovative research or teaching must not only review the breakdown of law and order and its consequences on economy and governance but also analyse the impact of research on the humanscape as the primary objective. It is in this context of creating better knowledge based on sound methodology and principles, that lawmakers and policymakers can find space for making sound decisions. , while adding that this was one of the primary challenges before all of us today.

Panel Discussion

Roadmap of Social Sector Development in North-East India

The Panel Discussion was chaired by Prof. Manoranjan Mohanty, Distinguished Professor, CSD with participation by four panelists. Prof. Atul Sarma, one of the panelists, pointed out the widely accepted view that North-East India has diversities that affected indicators of social development. He advocated the need for strengthening of local self-governance institutions in the region while pointing out that in India, in terms of social development index, small states have better outcome.

Patricia Mukhiem, Editor, Shillong Times, another panelist, highlighted various issues of North-East India while suggesting measures to improve the social development indicators in the region. Referring to social development as people-centric rather than project or infrastructure-centric, she went on to describe social development as something that looks at the concerns and happiness of the people. While there was a need for both formal and informal institutions in social development, she pointed out that ironically the informal institutions in North-East India were decaying in modern times and shedding their character. According to Ms. Mukheim, the need of the hour was to bridge the gap between elite and non-elite people of a community. She also focussed on various gender issues in North-East India. She concluded by sharing her views on tourism” as

providing some livelihood, but if we are going to kill it like we are killing the golden goose, then very soon that livelihood will also be lost to us.”

Mr. Sabyasachi Dutta, Secretary, Governing Council, Asian Confluence, Shillong emphasized that the region as a whole should come together to harness water resources which are in plenty. He regarded inadequate harnessing of water as an important cause of poverty in the region. According to him, the situation needs to be redressed through intra-state collaborations, collaborations between institutions within the states, district councils, municipalities and water boards. He also referred to the Act East Policy and its pros and cons in the context of North-East India. Ms. Sangeeta Barooah, Deputy Editor, WIRE emphasised on the inter-dependence of the economic development of a society with its social growth. According to her, the central government had been deliberating for quite some time about promoting the socio-economic upliftment of the region, first through its Look-East Policy and, more recently, through the Act-East Policy. Describing this as a welcome move, she said it showed that the central government wanted to see the region beyond the security paradigm. She was, however, critical of the Act-East policy, going by the earlier experience where “we mostly saw only a bunch of car rallies facilitating a jolly jaunt to a few persons with connections to South Asia and back in the name of promoting Look-East Policy.” Referring to the efforts of the present government in developing physical infrastructure, and promoting road, air and water connectivity as part of the policy aimed at opening up the region for trade, she described it as good news for the North-East. At the same time, it was felt that the emphasis of the efforts is more on providing trade opportunities for the big capitalists, or helping set up shops for mainstream India or facilitating those already in control of the economy of the region. As such, very little is being done to involve the new players from the local communities. In this context, she referred to a few initiatives like Start-up Assam and Start-up Manipur which sought to usher in a culture of entrepreneurship among the youth of these states. She wondered whether the Act East Policy would bring prosperity to the region as a whole or merely to the private players. She concluded by suggesting an alternative model of development based on equitable distribution of wealth.

Valedictory Session

Sh. B.P. Singh, former Governor of Sikkim, was the Chief Guest at the Valedictory Session of the seminar. In his valedictory address, he shared his views covering the two perspectives of (1) Geography, demography and spiritual heritage and (2) Democracy and its institution and contemporary development.

Before concluding his address, he requested researchers to undertake social mapping of the areas where darkness is abundant like lack of health care and education. He also called for judicious use of the efficient democratic administrative system available in the region. On the subject of insurgency, he cautioned that any action that precipitated a spurt in insurgency should be avoided. Pointing out that ideals of democracy for sustained development were vital, he visualised the emergence of a new society from the conflicts for transformation.

Recommendations/Suggestions and Action Plans

- 1) The general understanding of North-East India is that of a homogenous social and political entity although the region is characterized by pronounced heterogeneity, diversity and cultural plurality. Policy makers should give adequate consideration to the diversities and pluralities of North-East India while deciding the course of development, including programmes for intervention.
- 2) There are pronounced inter-state and intra-state variations in social sector development of North-East India. The reasons for these variations should be examined closely and region-specific focus interventions should be made accordingly.
- 3) The North-East India has better IMR because of the practice of breast feeding. However, low IMR of Arunachal Pradesh needs immediate and priority intervention.
- 4) Health deprivations of North-East have some specific challenges, like water and vector borne diseases. The flood-affected areas get cut-off from the rest of the region. Boat clinics have been found very useful for flood-affected people. The level of operation of boat clinics, however, needs to be scaled up.
- 5) The PDS is a big support to the people in the region. However, introduction of separate pricing for PDS distribution in hilly and remote areas of north-east region would be extremely helpful to the people.
- 6) Migration from the region is mostly of short duration. In that case, states of North-East India should take appropriate measures for retaining those migrants who come back to the state after gaining experiences/skills in various occupations from outside the North-east region.
- 7) Trans-border trade through North-East India must be strengthened. For that matter, building up adequate infrastructure is of utmost importance as the region has a very poor level of infrastructure that also hampers trans-border trade.
- 8) Water resource of North-East should be harnessed through collaboration between states and between departments within states. Inter-state and Intra-state collaboration (collaborations between institutions within the state say district councils, municipalities and water board) should be promoted to harness the water resources of the region for a better future.
- 9) In North-East India, informal institutions have traditionally played an important role in socio-economic development of the people. Therefore, strengthening of both formal and informal institutions in the region is important. In modern times, informal institutions in North-East India are decaying and shedding its character.
- 10) The inter-relationship of conflict and governance is a major problem of the region that also affects development adversely. The region is disempowered by obsessive concern for security and integration.
- 11) Imaginative and effective application of ICT in service delivery could go a long way in meeting the well-known deficiency of governance.
- 12) While rare of literacy in the region is good, there is enormous scope for quality improvement in school education.
- 13) Wealth inequality is widening in the North-East India. This will create social tension and other problems in a society that has traditionally egalitarian.



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