

North-east India: all that is in the name

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What North-east India needs is a change in the way of thinking that will integrate international and domestic politics, writes Sanjib Baruah.

Under watch

The phrase 'North-east India' entered the Indian lexicon only in 1971. Until 2003, the phrase referred to the seven states, separated from the Indian landmass by Bhutan and Bangladesh except for the 37-kilometre Siliguri corridor. The phrase, it bears repeating, originates in changes made to the architecture of governance of the region, including the creation of a number of small states that culminated in the North Eastern Council in 1971.

National security considerations were pre-eminent in the advent of the category 'North-east India'. It is perhaps not accidental that 1971 saw another dramatic change in the region's political geography. Pakistan was split and Bangladesh became independent. The Sixties were tumultuous years. India and China fought a war in 1962, the movement for Naga independence got into full swing and the Mizo armed insurgency began in 1966. After the humiliating defeat in the war with China, Indian policymakers began to fear that external and domestic enemies could come together in the region and mount a formidable threat to national security. By intervening in the Bangladesh war, India, to some extent, took advantage of an opportunity that arose to change that geopolitical ground reality. But the fact that the category 'North-east' too had its roots in the same set of national security considerations has escaped public memory.

Even though the North Eastern Council has had to

gradually adapt to the reality of democracy, that is not how it began. It was envisaged as an institution to promote security and development. Initially, it did not even include the chief ministers of the states. It was made up of the governors. A military man, the inspector-general of the Assam Rifles, was its security adviser.

B.P. Singh, who had held key positions both in the region and in the Indian home ministry, has written about having to struggle with the challenge of making the NEC fit into the constitutional framework of federalism in *The Problem of Change: A Study of Northeast India*. The NEC was technically made an advisory body so that "it would not infringe upon the political autonomy of the constituent units", but this came into conflict with autonomy. From a security perspective, however, such tensions were seen as inevitable, given the constraints of 'nation building' in a border region. The best the NEC could do was conduct itself in a way that would not "hurt the sensitivities of member units and make them feel like second class states in India's federal structure." As it became more democratic, its security function became weaker. But that does not mean that the security function devolved to the state governments. It shifted directly to the Union home ministry.

With the advent of the phrase 'North-east India', the area became a 'border area' and a security space in a way that it wasn't till then. The very naming of the region carries with it the burden of that legacy. After all, directional names reflect an external and not a local point of view.

While Pakistan after 1971 became a smaller country, Bangladesh did not stay India-friendly for long. Indian officials even believe that in recent years, it has become hospitable to Pakistani intelligence operations in India. While Bangladesh is "India-locked," says Bangladesh's foreign minister, India must remember that North-east India is "Bangladesh locked." This could be a wake up call for Indian policy-makers, but not in the sense that the security establishment might interpret it.

Ninety-nine per cent of North-east India's borders is with foreign countries, making it impossible to separate domestic and foreign

policy. To transform the region from a 'political, economic and cultural hinterland' into a vital zone of activities, it is not enough to build roads to India. The region's international borders would have to become spaces of cooperation instead of confrontation. A small example would illustrate this. The distance between Calcutta and Agartala before Partition was about 300 kms. It became 1,700 kms after Partition. Even the best roads in the world cannot make up for this difference.

It is not surprising, therefore, that while enormous amount of money has been spent to bring about development here, especially since the Nineties, by the end of that decade the economies of the entire region had decelerated. Not being able to take the transnational dimension into account has been the bane of Indian policy vis-à-vis the North-east. Of course, in its own way, the security establishment does take the transnational dimension into account. But transnationalism from its vantage point has little meaning beyond wanting India's neighbours to cooperate in counter-insurgency strategy.

Meanwhile, our security obsession has put real limits on what we could and could not do for development. The contradictions are perhaps the sharpest in the smaller hill states. Development policy there amounts to trying to create an elite to support the pan-Indian dispensation. In the make-believe world of formal rules, the "traditional" economies and political structures of the hills are being protected: for tribal lands, in theory, are owned by the community. But in reality, there has been a capture of community resources by local elites and a massive transformation of the de facto ownership of land and natural resources that eludes government land records. Indeed there is no cadastral survey of most tribal lands because they are supposedly community-owned. While a small elite may have developed a financial stake in the pan-Indian dispensation, one cannot say that about hearts and minds. Ideas about independence and autonomy remain attractive to both the educated youth and to losers in the transformation of property relations taking place outside the make-believe world.

In the meantime, as economists like Atul Sarma has pointed out, the absence of a land market has meant that neither formal credit nor investments can enter the rural economy, especially from outside. Even though the contradictions are apparent, our style of policy-making, that prioritizes (but does not achieve) political stability in a 'sensitive border region', has meant postponing all hard policy choices to an indefinite future. Without borders becoming spaces of cooperation, policy debates about the region can never address those fundamental dilemmas.

North-east India needs a major shift towards a way of thinking that integrates international and domestic politics. India's foreign policy towards its neighbours and domestic policy towards the North-east have to come together, and in doing so, it has to come out of the iron-grip of our security-wallahs.

P.S.

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