

## **Higher Education in the NER: Current Situation and the Initiatives Adopted**

By

Ms. Sudhiti Naskar

The North Eastern Region of India makes headlines for countless insurgencies and ethnic battles, although it would hardly represent the series of varied issues these states need to address. Education, which is one of the core features of any state or country's infrastructure, is *inadequate* in these states. Every year hundreds and thousands of students have to go out of their homes to other states in the country to be able to achieve standard higher education (HE). While it is a matter of pride for any institute to have students from different corners of the country, the trend itself points out to the fact that the existing colleges in some regions are failing to fulfill the academic and professional aspirations of the young scholars in their region.

The census of 2004 – 2005 show that the seven sister states in India's North Eastern Region (NER) have as many as three hundred and twenty<sup>i</sup> degree colleges in the state of Assam, and as less as only three<sup>ii</sup> colleges in Sikkim, with other states having varying but small number of degree colleges – suggesting that the development of education has been starkly uneven from state to state in the region.

This would also mean that the educational agencies both in the public and private sectors would have a big scope for expansion in this corner of the world. Every year hundreds and thousands of students from the North East come to the universities and colleges of Delhi, Calcutta, Bangalore etc.

for education in various fields. Keeping a tab on this outgoing stream would make a fascinating data pool for the academic agencies aspiring to spread higher education in the north east.

However, it needs to be mentioned, that the purpose of this article is not to advocate the spread of private academic institutions [which often provide expensive courses that in most cases fail quality test] in the region; rather it seeks to point out the existing situation of HE in the region, and a review of the initiatives taken by the nation to inject a new lease of life to HE for the students of NER.

First and foremost, why do we need to discuss the North Eastern Region of India with regard to its education, and why specifically about its Higher Education? Why not primary or secondary education? The answer to the first question can be capitulated in the following manner:

**The strategically important location of the NER:** Having established its potent position in the global economy, now India seeks to further its commercial and cultural ties with the other Asian countries, as a result of which the Look East Policy has been shaped. The NER would play a key role in this design, for its advantageous geographical location, and close cultural and anthropological resemblance with other south Asian countries like Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Myanmar, Nepal etc. It is understood that the NER can successfully act as a transit point to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries. Hence, investing on the infrastructure in this region will benefit the country as a whole. And at the same time it will be a positive –sum game for the region as it will naturally prosper when developments in the industry and communication takes place in its territories with improved trade exchanges with the ASEAN countries.

**Demand for HE in the region:** There is a stupendous demand for HE in these states, as has been mentioned before in this article. It is lagging far behind<sup>iii</sup> the national average of 8% general enrollment ratio in HE.

**Changing trends in HE:** During the second half of the last century HE has gone through a rapid change<sup>iv</sup> replacing the colonial style of education in which HE and knowledge remained within the custody of select individuals. Today, there is a pointed and highly motivated drive towards making

our world a knowledge society, as postulated by most of the leading academicians world wide, in which people would ideally have access to information and knowledge; for which general and higher education to all would be an indispensable tool. Thus, when India along with other countries is a part of this evolutionary process in the field of education, her NER cannot remain alienated from it.

**Fulfilling the aim of HE:** One of the objectives of HE is to equip students to be socially aware and give back benefits to the society. Statistics show that most students from the NER - availing HE in other states or outside the country - cannot go back to the region for lack of professional opportunity that meets their demand, considerably limiting their scope to contribute to the society they grew up in. Hence, to let the NER gain from its own educated people it is imperative on the nation to create an atmosphere conducive for education and scopes of employment.

The answer to the second question mentioned above, is that the situation of primary and secondary education in this region is in fact better<sup>v</sup> than most of the places within the country, if we judge from the point of view of standards of education, rates of general enrollment, and rates of drop outs in comparison to the national scenario. Owing to the Christian missionary – led education since the pre – independence era this region has attracted pupils from all over the country to its elite boarding schools. However, this is not to suggest that the region has no problems in terms of primary and secondary education. Countless insurgencies continue to internally displace a great number of people from their homes, and obstruct children from having the scope of unhindered, smooth – sailing education.

Now, let us analyse the scenario of higher education in the region. As far as simple degree colleges are concerned, the student - college ratio in the state is far below that of the national average. But the magnitude of the gap between demand and supply for education can be fathomed when it comes to availability of the specialised courses, which is becoming increasingly important in this age of streamlined and specialised vocation- oriented education. The region is pathetically wanting in this aspect. Specialised vocational educational fields like medicine, veterinary medicine, teachers training, technological colleges and colleges offering other vocational courses – are a rarity in this

region. Assam is the only exception for the unique hegemonic political status it has enjoyed in the region in both the pre and post - independence era. The following charts would aptly delineate the situation of HE in the six other states in comparison with Assam:

**Educational Information: NER 2004-05**

**Degree Colleges**

| State             | Universities | Institutions deemed to be universities | Institutions of National Importance | Arts, Science and Commerce Colleges | Oriental learning colleges | Agriculture colleges | Law colleges |
|-------------------|--------------|----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|--------------|
| Arunachal Pradesh | 1            | -                                      | -                                   | 9                                   | -                          | -                    | -            |
| Assam             | 5            | 1                                      | 1                                   | 320                                 | 1                          | 2                    | 20           |
| Meghalaya         | 1            | -                                      | -                                   | 48                                  | -                          | -                    | 3            |
| Manipur           | 2            | -                                      | -                                   | 58                                  | -                          | -                    | 3            |
| Mizoram           | 1            | -                                      | -                                   | 27                                  | -                          | -                    | 2            |
| Nagaland          | 1            | -                                      | -                                   | 34                                  | -                          | 1                    | 3            |
| Sikkim            | 2            | -                                      | -                                   | 3                                   | -                          | -                    | 3            |
| Tripura           | 1            | -                                      | -                                   | 14                                  | -                          | -                    | 1            |

*Source: (i) National Sample Survey Organisation (ii) Office of the Registrar General of India (Education data – 04 - 05)<sup>vi</sup>*

## Vocational Degree Colleges

| State             | Medical Colleges | Veterinary science colleges | Teachers training colleges | Engineering tech. colleges | Other colleges |  |  |
|-------------------|------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------|--|--|
| Arunachal Pradesh | 1                | -                           | -                          | -                          | -              |  |  |
| Assam             | 7                | 2                           | 41                         | 2                          | 3              |  |  |
| Meghalaya         | 1                | -                           | 4                          | 2                          | -              |  |  |
| Manipur           | 1                | -                           | 5                          | 3                          | 2              |  |  |
| Mizoram           | 1                | -                           | 1                          | -                          | -              |  |  |
| Nagaland          | 1                | -                           | 4                          | -                          | -              |  |  |
| Sikkim            | 2                | -                           | 1                          | 1                          | -              |  |  |
| Tripura           | 1                | -                           | 1                          | 2                          | 3              |  |  |

*Source: (i) National Sample Survey Organisation (ii) Office of the Registrar General of India (Education data – 04 - 05)<sup>vii</sup>*

Both the charts throw light upon the very limited scope of higher and specialised education in the region, apart from the relative intra – state gap in terms of availability of education.

Now, let us understand why national or international academic institutions have not been proactive about expansion in these areas for so long. The reason chiefly has been related to the political make of the territory. Political instability, insurgencies and internal displacement have largely discouraged the national and international education institutions to spread their wings here. In addition, lack of proper infrastructure has also played a major role. Poor connectivity has rendered it to be a "remote" region to the collective consciousness of people – making most capable teaching professionals shy away from joining the institutions here. It is also a fact that the impoverished

economic condition of the masses here have rendered most unable to pay for usually expensive higher education.

But of late, various central institutions are making fruitful efforts at improving the standard and scope of HE in the region. Indira Gandhi National Open University has a pioneering position among them. Through its Educational Development of North East Region Unit (EDNERU) the university has introduced various need – based, custom made courses like Public Policy, Community Cardiology, Health Care, Hospital Waste Management, and Food Safety - at the Certificate, Diploma, as well as Graduate, Post-Graduate and Doctoral levels for the youth of this region<sup>viii</sup>.

One of the main aims of the courses has been to cater to the demands of the youth of this region with a focussed approach. Hence, highly specialised subjects like Dairy Farming, Food Processing including pickle and jam making, Floriculture, Beekeeping, Mushroom Cultivation, Watershed Management & Water Harvesting, Maintenance & Repair of Computer Hardware, Handicrafts (Cane & Bamboo), Setting up of Small Enterprises, and Audio-Video Production and so on have been introduced for the students through the certificate courses. While it is arguable if such vocational courses can be included within the breadth of HE, these nonetheless fulfill at least one main criterion of the same, i.e. specialisation.

One of the most successful features of the IGNOU courses has been introduction of Online Distance Learning (ODL) methods to impart the courses by successful usage of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). In the restive political scenario of NER, ODL holds the promise to attain a greater and wider reach above the conventional classroom – based education as it successfully crosses the barrier of geographical distance.

Local universities like Dibrugarh University and others are also introducing many vocational courses to rise above the poor standards of professional skills of the otherwise educated degree-holders; and according to Professor Kulendu Pathak, universities of the region in general are increasingly trying to meet the demands for vocational training.

The centre has also extended a firm helping hand by doling out funds and concessions for the seven sister states. In Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh's Address to the Nation in 2007<sup>ix</sup>, one of the thrusts was clearly on the NER to usher it in to the mainstream of HE through various policies.

However, policies too have limitations as far as bringing solutions is concerned. For example, many academicians of the region argue that the policies are faulty and therefore, incapable of assisting where needed. Professor Kulendu Pathak feels that the rationale behind University Grants Commission's (UGC) providing "special assistance" is off-the-mark, because it seeks to extend help only to districts/villages based on the low level of literacy (lower than the national average of 65.38%<sup>x</sup>); a policy, which he feels, will limit UGC's scope of providing the much-needed assistance that almost all the institutes of the region need.

However, solutions do not take place in any troubled zone easily; and with the NER the problems become far more complicated in the back drop of an intricate socio-political mosaic. The people of the states often complain about the malpractice of funding directed to the states by the centre. Still, there is room for optimism as it is from confusion and chaos that the new order arises. The history of the world has been a witness to that fact.

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<sup>i</sup> 'Educational Information in NER 2004-05', <http://db.nedfi.com/content/education-0>, accessed electronically on August 16, 2009. The site refers to National Sample Survey Organisation and Office of The Registrar General of India

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>iii</sup> Pathak. Kulendu, "Problems and Perspectives of Higher Education in North East India", ed. Venkatasubramaniam. K, *Issues in Higher Education - Vol. II*, ICFAI Books, ICFAI University Press, 2004, p. 137.

<sup>iv</sup> Kaul. Sanat. "Higher Education in India: Seizing the Opportunity", Working Paper No. 179, [http://www.icrier.org/pdf/WP\\_179.pdf](http://www.icrier.org/pdf/WP_179.pdf), accessed electronically on August 24, 2009.

<sup>v</sup> 'Educational Information in NER 2004-05', *op.cit.*

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*

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vii *Ibid.*

viii "Activities", <http://www.ignou.ac.in/EDNERU/activities.htm>, accessed electronically on September 5, 2009

ix "Prime Minister's Address to the Nation from the Red Fort on Independence Day, 2007",  
<http://education.nic.in/policypronouncements.htm>, accessed electronically on August 25, 2009

x "India's Literacy Rate Increase Sluggish", [http://news.indiainfo.com/2008/02/01/0802010844\\_india\\_rate.html](http://news.indiainfo.com/2008/02/01/0802010844_india_rate.html),  
accessed electronically on September 1, 2009.