

Why Education Is an Answer to India's North Eastern Region

By

Ms. Sudhiti Naskar

Back in 2005, Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh laid bare his vision about India's North East, that he outlined at the East Asia Summitⁱ – which stressed over looking North East to have a beefed up trade interactions between the ASEAN countries by opening up strategic channels and highways internationally and developing the region in question "as a major manufacturing and redistribution hub"ⁱⁱ.

A good three and a half years has passed since then, but India has not been able to warm up its North East to the idea of turning it into a corridor of prosperity both for the state and the region. The failure can be partly ascribed to the insurgencies and internal ethnic conflicts, and to a large extent, the socio – economic impasse the seven sister states find them in. Lack of employment and scopes of higher education has driven the youth out of the states for better facilities and opportunities; and -in most cases- to frustration and anger over the present state of affairs. Such a situation, in turn has wielded additional pressure to the already full cart of the hills, brimming with inter-ethnic and administrative problems – creating an atmosphere of distrust, hatred and sectarianism. While hatred and separatist movements cannot be a solution to the problems of the seven sister states, there is a need to taking long term and immediate measures that can ensure participation of the youths in the local and national, as well as, global socio–economic processes. The

respective state governments in the region and the centre can start including its people in this process by making sure that education reaches all; - including the Internally Displaced People (IDP); and the scope of higher education is adequate in the region.

The centre and the respective state governments have opened up various programmes or projects to serve this purpose. The nationwide initiative of spreading mass education started back in 2001-2002ⁱⁱⁱ with the then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee pioneering Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan (SSA)– the GOI mission to 'educate all' following the mandate of 86th amendment to the Constitution of India that advocates free and compulsory Education to the Children of 6-14 years age group, as a Fundamental Right^{iv}.

The SSA has been fairly successful in the north eastern region. It has supplied the states with plum monetary and infrastructural support in the course of the implementation of the project. For example, the state of Mizoram had received a total amount of Rs. 1, 14, 25,000 during 2000 – 2001 for its Saiha district and capital Aizawl^v alone, by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD). And not only Mizoram, the whole region was being considered for a further 15% concession^{vi} by Parliamentary Standing Committee on Human Resource Development (HRD) for the low amount of internal revenue generated by the seven sisters states, while the rest of the country, barring Jammu and Kashmir, was asked by the centre to bear half the cost of SSA in their respective states. Schemes like communitisation of elementary education, community mobilisation, progress of civil works and actions on drop-out children have been implemented.

Apart from SSA which mainly aims at universalising elementary education, the UPA government has come up with National Common Minimum Programme (NCMP), which mainly focuses on higher education. Apart from its main objective to translate the broad scenario in education, one of its main commitments is that all North Eastern States will be given special attention to upgrade and expand infrastructure^{vii}.

However, it cannot be claimed that the centre and the respective state governments in the region have been greatly successful in addressing the demand for education, for the obvious factors - ranging from lack of infrastructure, political unrest to corruption in terms of distribution of fund allocated to the states by the centre - acting as practical deterrents. Though, various national universities like the Indira Gandhi National Open University are aiming at spreading higher education in the region through various SSA initiatives, it will take a long time before the infrastructure can be built and adequately made use of.

The drive to spread education in north east should be initiated keeping in mind some broad ground realities –

(a) The rate of literacy is not a problem here, since the rate is higher than the national average; hence, the drive should be more on adequate and standard secondary and higher education. However, as far as the children of the IDPS are concerned ensuring elementary education and re- assumption of the dropouts in the schools would be equally imperative

(b) Since, there is not much scope of employment in the region; the employability of the graduates should be kept in mind before taking initiatives to opening up new educational institutions or courses. The new courses or institutions should ensure that their graduates are employed, if not in the region, at least outside it.

The lack of employment in the states of North East is a nagging problem and cannot be solved easily - keeping in mind the region's complex mosaic of demography, polity and economy. In addition, countless ethnic battles and insurgencies make it impossible for the industries to survive here, let alone have a strong footing. R.S. Mooshahary – the State Chief Information Commissioner, Assam, once expressed grave concern over the number^{viii} of unemployed youth registered with the employment exchange of Assam. And not only Assam; - Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim – all these states have the

same story to share. It's the identical tale of unemployment and potential reserve of youth made redundant by lack of work; and many times - also employability.

The India Labor Report 2007^{ix} says that Indian youth are simply unemployable. Failure in quality education and skills, lack of technical and vocational training and policy blunders necessitate thorough structural change in our system of education - says the report. The same observation is expressed by a study commissioned by the Team Lease Services, a human resource and staffing agency: "Ninety percent of employment opportunities require vocational skills, but 90% of our college and school output has only bookish knowledge".^x When the state of the affair in the academia is such in the so-called mainland states; one may well imagine what the situation is likely in the under privileged hilly regions - lacking in infrastructure and opportunity.

Students or professionals who move out of the hills find it difficult in the already competitive employment market outside. It is, thus, required of them to hunt for jobs and at the same time come to terms with the changing socio - cultural scenario relocation or migration brings to the lives of the migrants. Thus, lack of employment does not only cause migration, but also affects the emotional and cultural mindset of the migrated people.

Those who chose to stay back, or are forced to do so - for lack of money or opportunity - eventually turn into a redundant, aimless lot. This section of youth is more of a burden to the job market as their scope of employability is reduced as far as unskilled labour is concerned. A degree holder will not deign to the level of menial labour. Out of such a situation arises faithlessness among the youth over the whole system; and frustration creeps in. Soon, anger ensues and such negative energy finds an easy and lucid outlet in terrorism, extortion and other illegal activities - against the *establishment*. So this is a never ending cycle -of - insurgency discouraging the industries to take shape in the hills, resulting in lack of employments and infrastructure, which in turn evokes anger and frustration over the inefficacy of the state and the central administration among the people and erupts in destructive insurgencies.

If the Look East Policy, popularly endorsed by the politicians and media, do take shape – the face of North East may change for good. After all, why a region would be deprived of the fruits of changing socio-economic climate the rest of the country is having a taste of? But, it is needless to say, that the region can savour its due share of the pie, only when its own people can take part in this huge economic surge. They can do that by being conducive for the market and supplying it with employable youths. Two chief factors can help attain this goal - peace and education.

ⁱ Editorial Article, "Look east, Think North East", *'The Hindu'*, Monday, Dec 26, 2005, <http://www.hindu.com/2005/12/26/stories/2005122601461200.htm> , accessed on June 3, 2009

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ 'Manual for Planning and Appraisal', Ministry of Human Resource Development, Department of Elementary Education & Literacy, April, 2004, <http://74.125.153.132/search?q=cache:0mA-w3c-9ZsJ:www.education.nic.in/ssa/manual-planningandappraisal-ssa.doc.pdf+snapshot+of+Sarva+Shiksha+Abhiyan&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=in> , accessed on June 30, 2009

^{iv} <http://ssa.nic.in/> , accessed on June 16, 2009

^v "SSA at the initial stage", 'SSA in Mizoram', <http://mz.ssa.nic.in/ssamizoram.html> , accessed on June 15, 2009

^{vi} Special Correspondent, "Reduce SSA funding share for northeast", *'The Hindu'*, New Delhi, March 4, 2007, <http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/thscrip/print.pl?file=2007030414431000.htm&date=2007/03/04/&pr d=th&> , accessed on 12 June 2009

Under the SSA programme, the Centre has been providing 75 per cent of the funds right through the 10th Plan period for the implementation of the programme in all the states. Hence, the ratio was 75:25.

^{vii} Posted by Kumaraswamy, V. M., "Archive for the 'CIC's Northeast INDIA' Category", June 26, 2006, <http://egovindia.wordpress.com/category/cics-northeast-india/page/4/>, accessed on 10 June 2009

^{viii} Mooshahary, R.S. , "Education And Employment Products Without Prospects", <http://www.sicassam.in/news/29-nov-07.html> , accessed on June 15, 2009. The Assam labour minister informed the Assembly in its last session that there were 1058247 educated unemployed registered with the employment exchanges in the state. This included 1128 engineers, 385 doctors, 425 agriculture graduates, 129 veterinary graduates, 11482 postgraduates in arts, science and commerce and 208384 graduates.

^{ix} *Ibid.*

^x *Ibid.*