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Debates on Development and Underdevelopment of North East India

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Abstract

In everyday parlance "development" and "progress" are almost interchangeable terms. However, evaluating development within the framework of the North East is a rhetorical device that gives rise to the idea of "underdevelopment." The region may have reached a level comparable to other states in the nation due to its cultural richness, plenty of raw materials, and strategic location. It also benefited from adequate internal political management and support from the central government. Scholars have recently debated the development and underdevelopment of North East India due to the Indian state's post-colonial initiatives that have left the region with a "lack" of development. Many academics have debated the North East region, its economic backwardness, and its conflict-prone condition, leading to polarised opinions. In the current era of globalization, market economy, and development as a means of reducing economic backwardness is thriving, but it has also been stated that the region has been continuously exploited and neglected from colonial times till the present. The North East has experienced persistent underdevelopment due to colonial exploitation, current extraction, and carelessness, which has caused the region to lag behind the rest of the country. So, it is a matter of time to see how the debates around development in the North East give us vivid ideas involved in its process of development that culminated towards underdevelopment in the region that will help further in taking actions for the betterment of North East India.

The Context of the Debate around Development and Underdevelopment

When evaluating the North East, it is crucial to consider the historical, post-independence, and contemporary factors that contributed to the region's marginalization, exploitation, and backwardness and that helped to set the stage for the recent debate and discussion concerning its conditions. There have been noticeable attempts by the British Raj to extend eastward since the start of the Anglo-Burmese war in 1626. They quickly took control of Assam's lush Brahmaputra and Surma valleys, and they gradually started bringing the "wild tribes" in the area's hills under control. To harness the region's vast natural riches for commercial gain, the colonial rulers established a systematized administration there.

As "Tea Mania" spread among the colonial authorities, they began cultivating tea across large swaths of land, driving out the native inhabitants. Productivity in the area was weakened and

impacted by this frenzied drive for tea. The excess produced was exported outside the area to various locations in Europe and the Indian subcontinent. Due to the colonial economy's propensity for exploration, these elements laid the groundwork for the region's underdevelopment.

Following independence, the region's development followed a similar trajectory when it came to the external market, which in this case took the form of the growing national capitalist class in mainland India.

The area rich in natural resources—oil, tea, gas, and forests—was taken over by the Indian mainland, which led to an increase in the import of products and a decline in the region's potential for production. Even after the market economy was opened up in the 1990s, the region's economic situation did not improve to the average level, which resulted in extreme poverty and the demands of numerous insurgent groups for both the region's improvement and its secession from mainstream India. Up until recently, the central government's developmental strategies to address the insurgency problem and reduce economic regression have not been able to yield satisfactory results.

These factors of lack of economic development, societal conflicts, and acute increase in the developmental policies for economic and overall growth of the region which has not witnessed its achievements have led the scholars to debate about the “underdeveloped” condition of the North East.

“Development” the principle of the debate about North East India

The development debate offers context for comprehending the region's underdevelopment and economic backwardness, which results in a variety of scholarly perspectives on the matter. The development strategies implemented to reduce the region's economic backwardness after the 1990s demonstrate the many points of view held by academics, which aid in improving our ability to analyse data regarding the North East's underdevelopment and development.

In the chapter "Production of the Insurgent Subject" of his book "Governing India's North East-Essays on Insurgency and the Culture of Peace," Samir Kumar Das (2013) presents an extremely intriguing account of how the people of the region have always developed a sense of resistance against the developmental policies that have led to the emergence of the New Citizen.

In the modern world, movements of a different kind are gradually replacing the self and other opposition and work towards justice. These movements are a reaction to the inept developmental policies and exploitation that have up until now defined many social movements against economic backwardness in the North East.

The fight for justice has surfaced in the form of new social movements calling for accountability and transparency in government, protesting against the eviction of citizens due to development projects, and other initiatives that have, if not brought communities together, at least made them more peaceful. Many initiatives spearheaded by Akhil Gogoi and his Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS), which was founded in 2005, make it clear that they attempted to depart from the "centralised control over resources" that was previously in place.

People also voiced their displeasure at the government's failure to shield them from man-made disasters like dams and enormous population relocation brought on by so-called development projects, as well as natural disasters like floods and droughts. On the rights agenda, fighting corruption, defending people's rights to land tenure, and controlling resources are top priorities. These days, it is more common for claims of rights to be made on behalf of the entire local population rather than just one ethnic group or community at the expense of another.

This analysis shows that the development projects so far adopted have created a kind of new citizen which brings into account a sense of homogeneity among the people despite the differences. Is Samir Kumar Das making a claim of positivity about the development schemes of

the government that is leading towards protest against it and fabricating a new citizen? remains a moot question.

Scholar Gulshan Sachdeva (2007) appears to argue, in an attempt to analyse "India's North East Rejuvenating a Conflict-riven Economy," that the region's failure to develop economically is not the result of "economic neglect," but rather "because of an inappropriate economic policy framework which has created an unbalanced and unsustainable economy and destroyed the basis for institutions of a modern market economy in the region." The historical context, constitutional provisions, and geographic location have compelled the national government to take action to integrate the Northeast region's economy with the national one. The central government's adoption of regional development plans, which transfer surpluses from one region to another, inspired the formulation of several schemes for the infrastructure and economic development of the Northeast Region.

Nevertheless, the Planning Commission's and North East Council's current strategies haven't produced satisfactory outcomes. The Planning Commission and State have not been able to offer sufficient momentum for local development or to create processes of self-sustaining growth. The policy framework produced a distribution-oriented process that is politically guided. As a result, natural resources, savings, profits, and similar assets are leaving the area for other high-productivity areas. Enough money has also been given to the area, but some academics claim that corruption has prevented it from really funding the projects.

According to G. Sachaev, these problems can be resolved if the government takes a leading role in facilitating rather than driving development, opening up the economy to the global market, and implementing the central government's decentralised liberal economy. This indicates that in order to address the economic liberalisation of the era and reduce the economic backwardness of the region, the economic policies that have already been implemented need to be resurrected. Strong state governments also need to play a key role alongside the central government.

The above analysis of the scholars conveys a sign of positivity involved in the developmental schemes creating new citizens and also adopting a new economic framework in this liberalized economy that could enhance the condition of the region, but these assertions will always remain debatable. Because the question arises "Can the construction of large dams, can light up a poor's life?." As it will be discussed below, many scholars have criticized the government's developmental efforts, as for them these are responsible for the present condition of North East.

In the chapter "Nationalising Space" of his book *Durable Disorder*, Sanjiv Baruah (2005) examines how developmentalist organisations portray people and places as underdeveloped. He observed in Arunachal Pradesh that the Indian state's attempt to nationalise this frontier region's space is what gave rise to the development narrative there. However, neither the best interests of the people of Arunachal Pradesh nor the facts supporting the inevitable nature of "progress" and "civilization" served as the foundation for the development institutions. The planned and unexpected result of the Indian state's attempts to establish control over this border region and to make it a "normal" part of India's national space, as stated by Baruah, was this.

The process of nationalizing the area led to New Delhi taking the lead in determining the course of the region's development, with bureaucrats setting the agendas. Furthermore, the discourse on development has been able to align the ambitions of Arunachal Pradesh's new elites with the national security objectives of New Delhi. If we take a comprehensive approach, it illustrates a concept of people-governing. Prasenjit Biswas (2018) criticizes the development rhetoric that perpetuates relationships between the "periphery" and the "lack" in his essay "Post development, Democratic Discourse, and Dissensus: A Critique of Vision 2020," which is worth looking at.

Although Vision 2020 employs a unique approach to entice the local populace and state government, it is never implemented in practice. The neo-liberals and capitalists present their agenda of resource extraction from the region under the pretext of closing disparities. The statist and corporate policies of "maximum" use of the region's underutilized resources drive an accumulation policy. The vision argues that the region's abundant resource endowment can only be used to raise living standards for the populace if the sectors with a comparative advantage are identified and supportive environments are established for the growth of these sectors' investments.

Accelerating the development and creating opportunities for productive employment can be achieved by focusing on the agro-processing industries, modernizing and developing sericulture, investing in manufacturing units using local resources, utilizing the region's large hydroelectric power generation potential, and developing services like tourism. The notion of the central government quickly creating a market for natural resources depletes the resource bases of the local communities.

The text attempts to use a "public hearing" to garner support from a segment of society by using a discursive method of "consensus building" for already-existing economic plans. "The text is silent about how it culled all these diverse and variegated public opinions in finalising the document," and the voices of support and criticism can only be heard at the "end." Thus, the text makes an attempt to entice readers by outlining the advantages of the projects as well as appropriate pay and settlements, but it stays distant from reality. Furthermore, cultural values and artefacts are diminished by the transnational ideal of utilising cultural symbols and practices to achieve global connectivity. The people's innate inventiveness is not honoured in the vision. The entire concept of development is around using economic growth to quell unrest while inspiring people with fictitious promises and benefits that only a select few can fulfil and which ultimately serve as a means of capital circulation.

In his book "Understanding Underdevelopment: State of Economy in the Northeast," Thingnam Kishan Singh (2018) refutes the notion that the region's underdevelopment was caused by the mainstream development discourse's promotion of dependency. To assess the issue of underdevelopment, he starts by looking at the history of colonial rule in the region that provided the basis for underdevelopment. The native people was displaced, large areas of land were cleared for tea plantations, and copious amounts of excess were taken by the British as they attempted to discover and use the region's natural resources for their own benefit.

The system of unequal exchange based on cheaply manufactured consumer goods saturated the market, causing traditional trade to break down under fair exchange. This led to an increase in dependency, which destroyed the traditional economy and exhausted the traditional resource base. Following independence, little changed in the circumstances. T.K. Singh claims that the Indian government "evolved complex strategies for achieving growth of capitalism in India," which made it "instrumental in propelling capitalist development." The region's underdeveloped producing forces are constantly left out of the much-hyped economic packages and policies created in New Delhi's power corridors. In an otherwise impoverished agricultural region, there is currently a high level of dependence. Growing demands on land due to population expansion, along with the inflow of foreign immigrants and current globalisation trends, led to liberalisation, which changed the cultivation of food crops into cash crops and increased reliance. It is also evident that individuals are being displaced by urbanisation without a suitable basis for productivity. In today's globalised world, there is a decline in the agricultural sector, leading to dependency. Manipur, for example, which has historically been a surplus exporting economy, is now a net importer. Manipur has been a region that imports rice from mainland India ever since it became connected with it during the post-colonial era, a worrying decline in output level

having been seen. Natural resource exploitation has persisted from the time of colonial authority till the present.

Thus, T.K. Singh suggests that rather than being reliant on imports, "development should necessarily address production and generation of productive base of the region" in order to create surplus and turn the area into an export processing hub.

In "Making Backwardness: How to Imagine the Northeast as a Development Deficit," Rohan D'souza (2007) tried to look at development through the lens of the North Eastern Region: Vision 2020 (NER) draft, which seeks to end underdevelopment, which leads to "hollow echoes." The author reiterates the long-abandoned view that development is an apolitical and ahistorical undertaking, while also arguing that the Northeastern region of India is mistakenly perceived as having a unique development deficit. NER lists "weak governance," "poor infrastructure," "flood devastation," and other backwardnesses as affecting the North East area.

The writers of NER fail to recognise the diversity of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds without making an effort to consider the ramifications of interacting with these groups. However, they make an effort to identify the cause of backwardness and introduce a solution—the market economy—that had not been there before. By building roads, dams, and other infrastructure that will meet the needs of the populace and spur development in a generally underdeveloped area, NER appears to "not only speak for the people, but, more importantly, the people seem to desire precisely what NER wants."

Rohan D'souza thus attempts to show how NER, tries to present North East not as a landscape of social, cultural and ecological diversity but as an empty space ready for market economy to achieve profit-making desires through displacement, dispossession and enclosure and also NER seems to suggest that 'North East should be colonized through extractive industries, unequal exchange and resource capture'.

These views show us how these scholars have become staunch critics of the government's idea of looking into the region, its exploitative measures which have haunted the region's citizens for years in the hope of development and altogether enters into a state of chronic underdevelopment.

Conclusion

From the discussions above, it is clear how the North East Region's backwardness has been brought up in academic discourse, providing us with perspectives that provide vivid insight into the region's lack of growth. The emergence of new citizens in the diverse state of communities, insufficient policies implemented by the federal government during this period of economic liberalisation, and the expectation of appropriate developmental policies all point to a hopeful future that may not materialise anytime soon. Nonetheless, the critics expose how the government's methods for implementing development-oriented policies eventually result in the region's underdevelopment.

By creating drafts of documents like Vision 2020, nationalising space in order to rule the people, luring them in with development amenities, fostering dependency, and maintaining the region's instability. Ironically, the North East area of India lags far behind in terms of development while having an abundance of natural resources compared to other Indian states. The region's economic backwardness may be attributed to the previously examined facts, as well as the absence of industrialization, infrastructure, and a strong network of nepotism and widespread corruption among politicians, bureaucrats, and executives.

Assuming that the Northeast lacked infrastructure, the central government, along with Russia and Romania, built an oil refinery in Barauni, Bihar, in 1963–1964. By constructing a 1200 km pipeline from Assam, this project demonstrates the widespread exploitation of the region. The

region's natural resources, such as crude oil, provide it with little revenue revenues, but it also receives minor royalties from the central government. Another example of youth exploitation-related animosity and backwardness in the Northeast is insurgency. Development will not be possible until and unless sufficient steps are taken to put an end to insurgency.

The central government has launched initiatives through the North East Council (NEC), Development of North Eastern Region (DONER), and a distinct ministry for regional development. However, the lack of awareness and excitement, along with the previously mentioned problems, have resulted in few positive outcomes. Being a territory bordered by rivers as well as plains and hills, the area constantly experiences flooding, landslides, and erosion, which causes further devastation.

So, it is the requirement of time not only to blame the colonial history and the central government for the lack of development in the region. Because it is evidently clear that these aspects have created underdevelopment but the people of North East along with the politicians should go further from this notion and work together to bring in development. Political leaders those who can exert pressure on the central government for the betterment of the people, free of corruption and nepotism along with people's awareness about the ongoing situation of development, is the need of the hour. The debates showed us the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of the whole development ideology and also demonstrates that without being allured by the state's indirect assertion of power to reach a developmental stage, everyone should instead work for the increase in production base of the indigenous population along with suitable policies that will enhance the region's capability and adheres towards development of the North East India in this era of Globalization.

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