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## **THE DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS IN THE NORTH-EAST INDIA : A CRITICAL INTERROGATION**

### ***Abstract***

*The north-east India which has been experiencing a skewed process of development since the colonial times finds itself in a more difficult position in the current context of globalisation, privatisation and liberalisation. Any developmental process, as is widely recognised, needs to build on the lived experiences of people and factor in their local resource base, needs and aspirations, cultural specificities and sensibilities. This is something which has been largely ignored in the case of the north-east India. What the colonial state did to pursue its own colonial interests was uncritically continued by the governments of the Independent India and the current processes of globalisation and privatisation continue to show lack of sensitivity to the needs and aspirations of the people of the north-east India. The loss of control over their own resources which are being taken away by the mercantile class, the growth of inequalities, the emergence of the hegemonic class of people within the north-east who find it easier to appropriate the benefits of developmental programmes are some of the issues which have gained greater visibility in the current context of globalisation. This paper seeks to engage with some of these issues.*

**Keywords :** *Hegemony, Globalisation, Liberalisation, Development, Identity*

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At the outset, I wish to make a few general observations on globalisation, privatisation and liberalisation in the context of which we are looking the developmental process in the north-east.

First, though globalisation is usually spoken in the same breath as the other two processes, that is, privatisation and liberalisation, I believe that globalisation has a higher epistemic status than the other two, especially in the context of India, for the simple reason that they would have been weaker without globalisation. In other words, it is the current process of globalisation which has really pushed both liberalisation and privatisation by devaluing the

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moral core of the mixed economy. If we did not have globalisation, the other two would not have had much empirical strength.

Secondly, globalisation is not something which is spectacularly new.

Marx spoke about it long ago. In his own words, 'the need of a constantly evolving market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere and establish connections everywhere' (1848 : 39). This is nothing but an articulation of globalisation. Surprisingly social science literature has not taken much cognizance of what Marx had argued passionately in his innumerable writings about the inexorable nature of capital to search for markets everywhere. It should be noted that this is one of the immanent tendencies of capitalism. What is, however, new is the *depth, scope and intensity* of globalisation which has left no part of the world untouched. Hardly any part of the world remains untouched by the process of globalisation and it has clearly and deeply touched almost every aspect-social, cultural, economic and political-of societies.

Thirdly, though the current phase of globalisation is organically connected to the project of modernity, somehow their relationship has not been properly theorised. What is modernity and how one can look at modernity and whether Europe was the only home of modernity are some of the issues I discussed elsewhere and therefore would not like to repeat here (Kumar 2008: 2010: 2013 : 2018). There is a strong need to problematise the relationship between the two. Modernity provides that logic and in fact, confidence to globalisation to spread its tentacles. The core of modernity which consists of reflexivity, rationality and optimism enables globalisation to impose itself on the world.

Lastly, at the cost of stressing the obvious, let me state that all these processes are essentially state-sponsored and capital-sponsored. There is a need to state it again and again so that the basic source of all these processes is not lost sight of. It is usually argued that in the context of globalisation, the State withdraws from the major economic decisions so that the 'immanent tendencies' of capitalism are allowed to express themselves. Nothing can farther than truth. Under the pressures of multi-national companies and their friends, the local bourgeoisie, the State actually facilitates the intensification of the process of globalisation by taking steps such as formulating favourable economic policies, cutting down funding on social welfare measures etc.

With these preliminary comments let us turn to developmental process in the north-east of India. Before that a word about development itself. The idea of development has received wide theoretical attention in the sociological literature. If one surveys literature, one gets to know that there are possibly three ways of looking at development (Portes 1988). First, the writings of

evolutionary thinkers such as Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Morgan etc. essentially look at development in terms of increasing social differentiation and functional specialisation. and the movement of societies from the simple, homogenous, undifferentiated state to complex, heterogeneous and differentiated social existence (Bogardus 1940). For them this constituted the very process of development. Comte looked at the development of societies from theological, through metaphysical and finally to the positive stage. The process of social differentiation was an integral part of the general societal development. It was Herbert Spencer who has given us a more elaborate account of the evolutionary process of development (Sctompka 1993 : 102-103). His argument is based on two fundamental assumptions. First, individuals are fundamentally unequal with respect to the genetic endowments and experiences which results in an increasing differentiation of roles, functions, power, prestige and wealth. Secondly, as a logical extension of the first, unequal access to power and wealth gets multiplied and aggravated resulting in greater and cumulative strengthening of initial differentiation into factions and groups. Secondly, following Max Weber, many looked at development in terms of enactment and internalisation of certain socio-psychological attributes (McClelland 1963 and Inkeles 1966). While David McClelland focussed on the need for achievement, Alex Inkeles, on the basis of a cross-cultural study of six developing countries, spoke about certain attributes such as readiness for new experience, disposition to form and hold opinion etc. on a number of issues as key elements of development. McClelland focussed at length on the need to acquire the required psychological attributes to achieve development. He focussed on n-Ach (short name for need for achievement). He argued that this was a critical factor for development. He gathered both historical and empirical evident to defend this point. For example, he found that n-Achievement scores obtained from content analysis of folk tales from preliterate societies correlated with the presence of some full time entrepreneurs in the society. Similarly, n-Achievement scores obtained from teaches employed to teach children in 21 different societies in in 1925 are positively correlated with the idea of economic growth in those societies between 1929 and 1950. Thirdly, the powerful writings of A.G. Frank (1978), Wallerstein (1979), Baran (1973) looked at development essentially in terms of freedom from the exploitative structure of world capitalism. They argue that development and underdevelopment are aspects of the same economic process and the former has been able to occur only by increasing the latter. They further argue that the existence of the world capitalist system means that the development potential of the underdeveloped countries is blocked. Some of the core arguments of the dependency theory can be placed as follows:

- A. Modernisation theories of development are empirically invalid and theoretically inadequate because they do not appreciate the history of relations between developed and underdeveloped countries. This absence fails to factor in a very important reason i.e. how developed

countries have historically exploited the underdeveloped countries.

- B. Development and underdevelopment should be seen as aspects of the same economic process and the former happens at the cost of the latter.
- C. The very existence of the world capitalist system blocks the development potential of the underdeveloped countries.
- D. The transnational companies are regarded as the main agents of neo-colonialism as it is through them the transfer of surplus takes from the periphery to the core.
- E. In order to develop what the underdeveloped countries should do is to cut off their links with the developed world and 'go it alone' (Wallerstein 1979).

Having got a sense of what we mean by development, let me now turn to the north-east. To get an adequate sense of the social reality of the north-east one needs to 'understand' it rather than merely 'know it'. Methodologically there is a distinction between 'knowing' and 'understanding'. While knowing refers to an objective exercise (collection of information), understanding refers to 'internalisation of what we experience' (Oniam and Sadokpam 2018 : 8). While knowing may not always be followed by understanding, understanding is necessarily preceded by knowing. In the popular collective imagination, the north-east India is usually associated with unbridled violence. The meta narrative of violence has characterised our understanding of what the north-east India is. It is true that violence of different forms has been a major aspect of the political history of the north-east. But the north-east also revealed dialogic possibilities. The peaceful resolution of political turbulence in Mizoram in the 80s through a democratic dialogue is a case in point. There are also sociologically more interesting aspects to the north-east than the commonly talked about issues of insurgency and violence. The north-east is hugely diverse in terms of cultural traditions, social structures, languages, philosophies that guide their worldview with a little more than 200 communities and languages present there. The north-east India consists of eight states which are Assam, Manipur, Tripura, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and the latest addition Sikkim. The total population is roughly around three percent of India's population and the area is around eight percent of the total area of the country. The north-east India has a density of 148 persons per sq. Km with Arunachal Pradesh recording the lowest density of population (13 per sq. Km) and Assam recording the highest density of population (340 per sq. Km.). There are some popular misconceptions that surround the north-east which we need to dispel (Oommen 2008). One such misconception is that the entire north-east is dominated by the tribal population. The fact of the matter is that only four (Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Nagaland) of eight states of the north-east are tribal majority states while the rest are not. Another popular misconception is that majority of communities practise Christianity. The fact is only three out of eight

states in the north-east are Christian majority states while the rest are not. For example, in Arunachal Pradesh thirty seven per cent of population profess Hinduism which is numerically the biggest religious community.

To be able to understand the current nature of the process of development influenced as it is by the processes of globalisation and liberalisation, it is important to understand that the roots of underdevelopment were laid during colonial history of the north-east India. The intense competition among the colonial powers of the English, the Dutch and the French coupled with the realisation that the north-eastern provided a number of strategic advantages made the English move towards the north-east and Assam was the first state to be colonised with the signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826. Manipur also got dragged into their ambit (Singh. 2008). The strategic advantage was in terms of the fact that this region provided an alternative transit route to both Burma and Thailand which too needed to be colonised. Further without extending control over this region, it was impossible for the British to exploit the rich and abundant natural resources of the region. A symbiotic relationship developed between the British and the commercial classes which resulted in a destructive exploitation of the resources of the region. They expressed their fondness for the region by calling it a 'jewel in the British crown' (Reid 1942 : 26). The most profitable resource they found in the region was tea in Assam. Vast tracts of land were captured for the purpose of expanding tea plantation. This severely undermined the productivity of the land. Surpluses generated from this region were exported outside to different parts of the mainland India and elsewhere in Europe. Colonial economy thereby created foundations for underdevelopment in the region (Singh 2008 : 191). The other thing they did which resulted in great impoverishment of the people was the introduction of monetised economy in place of traditional equitable exchange system. This deeply disturbed the traditional patterns of living and flooded the region with consumer goods. People were forced to trade their natural products like timber and rubber for opium which provided huge profits to the commercial classes. Dependency grew among the tribes for manufactured commodities from outside and along with consumption of opium destroyed the traditional economy and depleted traditional resource base ( Ahmed and Biswas 2004). Surpluses generated from this region were taken out and there was clearly no productive effort within the region. There was a systematic and organised effort made by the commercial classes with the able support of the then British govt. to exploit the resources of the region for their own benefit which resulted in its increasing impoverishment. Further colonial modernity through its hegemonic articulations contributed systematically to the devaluing of cultural traditions and practices in the north-east. It sought to privilege itself by calling the communities in the north-east as 'primitive, backward and regressive' as they would do so whenever they sought to subjugate the 'other' Thus the foundations of exploitative developmental process were laid during the British rule itself.

The post-independent India has not seen much of a change in terms of the way communities in the north-east are treated. Let us take one illustration. One of the most significant features of the north-east India is the communal ownership of the land which has been sought to be sabotaged. We all know that though Marx was initially critical of communal ownership of the means of production as it existed in India's villages because he believed that this would block the development of productive efforts and stunt socio-economic development, he later on wrote that the communal property relations could be democratic and offered autonomy in the actual conduct of their work to the individuals. This is because there was as yet no separation of workers from the objective conditions of production (Anderson 2014). Be that as it may, the ill-conceived policies and programmes of the government began to pose a serious threat to the pattern of the ownership of the land. In Meghalaya itself (where I work), one has observed indiscriminate issuing of pattas to the private individuals who can afford to buy the land thus depriving the poor people of their legitimate control over the land. There is a growing tendency on the part of developmental agencies to be critical of the communal ownership. They advocate a change from communal ownership to individual ownership both in agriculture and forest lands. The transfer of ownership from the community to the individual has certain serious implications. One of them is that the individual is not in a position to invest in the land as much as he is required to do thus reducing his chances of getting adequate returns from the land. He has come to depend heavily on the exploitative money-lenders and unfriendly government machinery thus making one of the commentators to say that there has been a shift from 'primitive independence to complete dependence' (Karna 1990 : 16). As a scholar of the north-east commented, 'the so-called shared experience of development between mainstream and periphery turns out to be a hierarchical flow of material and financial resources that assumes a centrist pattern' (Biswas 2018 : 453). Further it has led to the intensification of socio-economic inequalities which were not as sharp before as they are now.

The various ethnic movements which took place in the north-east India over a period of time are essentially a product of realisation among the people that their two central issues, that is, the issue of identity and lack of meaningful and productive development in the north-east were not adequately appreciated by the Indian state. For example, the Mizos had a serious grievance against the Indian State because it did not come to their rescue when they had a famine called Mautam famine in 1959 when the crops were destroyed and thousands of people lost their lives due to lack of food (Kumar 2010). The systematic neglect they were subject to magnified when this famine took place. Let me say a few words about this famine. The Mautam famine which takes place at regular intervals is considered a hugely amazing phenomenon. It results from the flowering of bamboo plants and consequent multiplication of rats. The rats relish the bamboo fruit which contains the seed. They come out

over ground even at the risk of being killed by serpents and other animals to relish the bamboo fruit. This significantly enhances the reproductive health of the rodents. As a result, they become prolific breeders increasing the size of rat population substantially. After exhausting the bamboo fruit, they have nowhere to go but on to the paddy fields and eat away the produce meant for the human beings, thereby creating a situation of severe food-shortage. Knowledge about this famine was originally transmitted through oral tradition. The tribal leaders would share their knowledge of this with others. Despite the fact that it happened at periodic intervals in Mizoram, not much understanding of this peculiar phenomenon and its consequences is available. The flowering of bamboo is a peculiar phenomenon in the sense that the entire forest of bamboo plants flowers at the same time which is why such an event is called 'gregarious flowering'. They die at the same time too. Records of bamboo flowering stretch back as far as ninth century A.D. when a particular variety of bamboo called *phyllostachys bambusoides* flowered in Japan (International Network for Bamboo and Rattan). Utter lack of any support from the government (both state and central) substantially increased the disillusionment among the Mizos who felt absolutely neglected. The fact that the Indian state did not come to the rescue of Mizos when this famine took place was a great source of anger for them which played an important role in strengthening their ethnic consciousness.

Under the current dominant discourse of liberalisation and privatisation which is essentially hegemonic and undemocratic, there has been a ruthless plundering of rich natural resources of the region and extraction of surpluses. Let me provide some illustrations. With respect to oil, two thirds of Assam crude oil is transported outside the region for refining which hugely benefits big capitalists thus depriving Assam of a very valuable resource which could be used for the development of Assam. Similarly, the massive establishment of tea plantations led to colossal profits for the investors. However this profit was not reinvested in the state but drained out and transformed into sources of profits elsewhere. Further this region is abundantly rich in forest resources but hardly any meaningful attempt has been made to use them for the development of the region. On the contrary, the forest resources have been ruthlessly plundered and extracted to serve the commercial interests of mercantile classes outside. This region has merely become an unwilling supplier of primary products to feed the industries elsewhere in different parts of mainland India. For example, timber is being continuously taken away from the region to feed the plywood industries in West Bengal, Haryana, Delhi etc. The finished products are sold in the national and international markets and surplus is appropriated by the capitalists. Traditionally communities living in the north-east had complete control over the forests and their economies were structured around the creative use of forest resources. This control is sought to be taken away due to the enormous pressures put by the powerful and dominant interests supported ably the current discourse of liberalisation. A

class of contractors, merchants, landlords and businessmen has grown in the region over the past few years and their assets multiplied manifold. These people have developed a vested interest in the current privatisation discourse as they are free to invest in areas which yield quick and easy profits rather than those areas which do not, though they are important from the viewpoint of long-term development of the region, yield such easy profits. Because of the overall dominance of skewed developmental discourse, only certain crops such as coffee, tea, jute etc are encouraged while other crops are ignored thus deepening inequalities between those who produce these and those who do not. In the classic sense of marginalisation, resources from this region are plundered and taken out to meet the needs of capitalists from outside and there is an appreciable lack of productive effort within the region.

Globalisation entails certain enormous consequences wherever it spreads. One of them, which has been extensively commented upon, is the increase in socio-economic inequalities. One of the ways through this happens is the primitive accumulation of capital (Patnaik 2011 : 26). Capitalists are able to acquire assets at throwaway prices causing severe loss to the State exchequer. This is what is generally termed as 'accumulation through encroachment' (ibid). These assets may be belonging to the pre-capitalist producers or to the state sector or even they may be common property of the community. This is what has been noticed in the context of the north-east also. One of the common complaints made by the people in Meghalaya, for example, is that the State has liberally given away the land which belongs to the community at throwaway prices to some of the most powerful individuals sharpening socio-economic inequalities in the state.

Secondly, globalisation brings along with it advanced and well-developed methods of production which causes a drop in employment increasing inequalities. The generalised employment situation continues to become worse even in the context of claims about impressive growth rate in the country. What this suggests is that the employment situation is satisfactory only in a few areas (which are highly skilled) of the economy but in the context of the generalised employment situation, it is indeed becoming worse due to the advanced methods of production which have clearly reduced employment opportunities.

Thirdly, the gradual withdrawal of the State from many significant areas, whether in the area of production of goods and services or in the sphere of education, has serious implications (Ibid). One of them is that many areas become excluded from the purview of affirmative action of the state which effectively means that these areas become unavailable to the dalits and tribal groups. The private sector is empirically outside affirmative action programme (reservation). Hence the conditions of dalits and tribal groups are only expected to become worse in the context of enhanced pace of globalisation as they are increasingly getting excluded from many areas where reservation policy could



be implemented. Whatever democratic gains they have made so far due to the affirmative action programme would be lost. This is something that the north-east is deeply concerned about as a sizable section of the population, which happens to be tribal, inhabiting the north-east falls within the purview of the affirmative action

Fourthly, contrary to popular imagination that globalisation would reduce the salience of particularistic identities such as ethnic, religious etc. , what one has seen is the intensification of these very identities. In the context of loss of employment opportunities caused by globalisation, the tendency is to blame the 'other' , who could be from a different ethnic, religious and linguistic background for snatching away the jobs without realising that the very structural logic of globalisation results in loss of jobs. The anger against the 'other' is articulated in ethnic and religious terms. One of the main objections against the Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) which has caused considerable anger in the entire north-east is that it takes away the jobs from the local population apart from causing a serious danger to their very cultural identity. Instead of holding government responsible for not creating enough employment opportunities, the blame is conveniently placed on the 'other' for taking away the jobs.

Finally, one can also see how internalisation of an evolutionary idea of progress has privileged certain symbols of modernity-flyovers, shopping malls, mega-projects- without realising the kind of damage they can inflict on the delicate structure of ecology in the north-east. The inherent ideological function of these symbols of power, that is, the advancement of global capital, is largely ignored. It is constantly emphasised that we need to have these symbols of power to prove that we are part of 'modernity' and willing to distance ourselves from 'primitive' and 'tribal' past. What this has led to in the north-east, as perhaps elsewhere, is that the very possession of these symbols of power contributed to a 'sense of loss' of collective self and tradition which has in turn led to banning of certain cultural artefacts, especially dresses of women in an attempt to reemphasise 'tradition' (Jilangamba 2018).

## **Conclusion**

To conclude the central argument that this paper seeks to make is that the kind of developmental process that has been initiated in the north-east is hegemonic and undemocratic, does not factor in needs and aspirations of the people, the resource base, history, the structural and cultural aspects of the north-east and thrives on extraction and appropriation of the resources of the north-east for the benefit of the corporate interests elsewhere which has become more intense in the context of the current phase of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation. Unless the developmental discourse becomes more democratic and non-hegemonic and one critically interrogates globalisation as a socio-economic process, the north-east India will continue to experience a skewed developmental process.

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