

The major trade routes are still the sea routes, and the percentage share of this trade the Northeast gets is still very little. If this is to improve, one of the thrust areas will have to be augmentation of road connectivity in the Northeast. -Pradip Phanjoubam\*

It is a great honour to speak to so many bright young students eager to contribute their might in uplifting the plight of their homeland, which has now known as simply the North East. I must add that it is also a little disconcerting to confront so many young inquisitive faces at the same time, knowing very well that nobody from the previous generation can match the fire of idealism in the eyes of the younger. But, let me remind the audience that the older generation has the experience of failures and successes, fight-backs and wisdom. Failures that each of us meets in life are important. They together make a person resilient.

Let it also not be forgotten that none of the successes or failures each one of us meets, are permanent, and one must be always ready to move on from where one is at any given time. If you meet success, you are fortunate. If even you meet failure, you should pick yourself up and move on. The American poet T.S. Eliot's interpretation of Krishna's message to Arjuna in the Bhagawat Gita in his celebrated extended poem "Four Quartets" was, life motto should always be "Not fare well, but fare forward, voyager." We should follow the advice.

What then are the five objectives that we must prepare to do to put our region on the track of development? In many ways, I think we have already begun Arunodoi's conclave embodies this. Let me explain.

## **Community**

Why do I say Arunodoi has already initiated the first step?

- I say this precisely because I believe building community is vital towards development. Arunodoi by bringing together young people from all the North East states and facilitating a meeting of minds is building such a goal-oriented community.
- Of all the attributes North East shares, it can be regarded as a geographical wonder. For instance, it is landlocked, connected to the rest of India by the narrow Siliguri corridor, which has been noted so many times by so many authors, is at some point as

narrow as 22km. Other than this 22km of the boundary with the rest of India, North East is surrounded by foreign countries, and the statistics show 2 percent with rest of India and 98 percent with foreign countries, like China and Bhutan to the North, Myanmar to the east and Bangladesh to the south. This is unique and this uniqueness comes with a peculiar psychology. This can mean both strength and vulnerabilities. This is where the idea of community becomes important. As a community, diverse yet unified, we must be prepared to take advantage of the strengths of this predicament and also meet and mitigate the vulnerabilities.



Image: Umngot River Meghalaya | Insight Assam

## Connectivity

This brings me to the second point – connectivity. This is related (or complementary) to the first point. When you enhance connectivity, the chances for the boundaries of individual communities and identities begin to expand. Connectivity hence is not just about diminishing physical distance between people, but also the psychological distance. But we have to be careful here, for familiarity is also known to breed contempt, especially if unequal relations result. The remedy would be to create a democratic structure with can optimise equality of opportunities. The Indian Constitution already provides a wonderful model for this. Indeed the North East Council, NEC and North East Developmental and Financial Institute, NEDFI, are showing extremely promising signs that such endeavours will reap rich results.

## Look/Act East Policy

Connectivity would naturally lead to the idea of India's Look/Act East Policy without the physical road connectivity within the North East as well the region's connectivity with the rest of India enhanced considerably, the Northeast region will not be able to take any significant advantage of this ambitious government policy of connecting the Indian market with the prosperous economies of [ASEAN through the North East](#). As of the moment, according to a study, trade with Myanmar and beyond along the border trade posts in Manipur and Mizoram is somewhat stagnated at around 44 million dollars annually. This

contrasts with the overall trade figure of 2 billion dollars per annum between India and Myanmar alone. With the [ASEAN](#) the figure is in the excess of \$5 billion per annum. In other words, the major trade routes are still the sea routes, and the percentage share of this trade the North East gets is still very little. If this is to improve, one of the thrust areas will have to be the augmentation of road connectivity in the region.

### **Value addition**

A lot many people are sceptical about the viability of the Look/Act East Policy on account of the belief that the North East will end up just as a transit route and not a significant contributor or beneficiary of the policy.

This, they argue is because the region has little or no unit that can be classified in the secondary sector or manufacturing sector of the economy. It has the primary agricultural sector but in its march for progress, it missed the secondary sectors and landed straight into the tertiary sector of services. I would argue that this can change on account of many shifts in economic paradigms in the globalised age and also because of the advent of digital technology.

- In the new world economic order, the secondary sector is no longer just about factories churning out products, but also of assembly units where manufacturers outsource the last miles value addition works of their products to other relatively low wage countries. For example, American products, ranging from branded shoes, garments, toys, bicycles etc, often come with “Made in Vietnam” or “Made in Cambodia” or “Made in Bangladesh” markings. As wages rise in more developed manufacturing hubs, the trend has been for manufacturers to look for relatively lower wage region to get the value addition works of their product done and sold. If the workforce in the North East too were to be imparted appropriate skills that cater to the needs of the time, and more importantly are disciplined to suit the needs of major brands manufacturers, the region too could become the new hub for value addition for these brands, thus be rewarded with an explosion of new jobs and cash liquidity.
- The arrival of the digital technology has also flattened inequality in terms of skills and knowledge. In this new paradigm, nobody has a head-start and everybody begins with the same blank slate. The North East too, thereby does not have to be at a disadvantage from the beginning.

### **Tourism**

The last point I want to make is the need for promotion of tourism. There can be no argument that the North East has tremendous tourism potential. It is blessed with a diverse range of cultures, cuisines, music, dances and other artistic talents. Its natural beauty is equally diverse and unique. From snow-capped mountains in Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim to the numerous rivers and lakes, of which the mighty Brahmaputra and the scenic Loktak are some. They can come to have the gravitational pull on international tourists if given the right value addition and publicity. Tourism on its own will chip in revenue and create jobs but indirectly it is vitally important in building an economy.

Some years ago, I had the opportunity to meet some important officials of the Japan Chamber of Commerce in Bangkok. What they told me was an eye-opener. They said one of the things that Japanese businessmen look for in deciding whether an investment destination is safe is whether Japanese tourists are fond of the place. The logic is, a place where ordinary Japanese families get to be fond of and visit regularly, is deemed as safe and conducive to business. In other words, tourists are in many ways the litmus tests that inform investors where it is safe to make business ventures. This being the case, the North East must be a safe and healthy place to invite bigger revenues in future.



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