

North-East India: Development and Conservation

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Abstract

There is a challenge of conserving the nature and environment of North-East India without compromising its economic development. The urban based exogenous development strategy with focus on industrialization may not benefit the region and perhaps may hinder the way of becoming the region self-sufficient. Development model in the region must analyse the possible cooperation and contradictions that are emerging between environment and development factors here. The paper suggests Bioregional model as most fit model for the region and discusses the economic diversification of this region (NER) which can take many forms. The mixture of local identity and place-based knowledge can play a central role in the formation of several rural businesses in the region.

Keywords: North-East Region, Development, Bioregional, Local,

Introduction

There is an ongoing subject of argument in academics whether a specific environment (such as rural, hilly, remote etc.) represents a constraint to be removed or offers an opportunity to be celebrated (Newbery et al., 2017). Undoubtedly, the remoteness or accessibility of a location matters for general development (entrepreneurship). Nevertheless, the existence of important natural resources, the climate, heritage and the landscape present opportunities (Stathopoulou, S., 2004). Many Literatures (Basumatary, M. and Panda, B., 2020; Mishra, S.K., 1999; Ray, B. D. and Baishya, P., 1998; Rao, V. V., 1975) talk about the natural and geographical constraints of Northeast India. Nevertheless, Northeast India is a place renowned for its magical beauty and bewildering diversity. The lushness of its landscape, geographical and ecological diversity makes the North East quite different from other parts of the subcontinent. Among the top five States/UTs with the most forest cover percentage (of

their geographical area), three are from the North-East Region. The total forest cover in the northeastern states is 1,69,521 sq km, which is 64.66% of the total geographical area of the northeast (India State of Forest Report, 2021). A country always needs such green areas and the geographical, agricultural and environmental systems embedded in it for its sustainability (Van der Ploeg et al., 2000). While there is a 1,540 sq.km (+0.22%) increase in the forest cover of India over 2019, the region lost 1,020 sq km of forest cover from 2019 to 2021. Hence, there is a challenge of conserving the nature and environment of North-East India without compromising its economic development.

In the global investors summit, 2023, government has showcased the investment and trade potential of the Northeast Region of India as well as the scope for industrial growth and expansion in the region. Industrial activities can be a possible solution for the economic lag of the region. However, despite its popularity as an economic development strategy, the overall contribution of industrial recruitment is highly debated (Deller, S. et al., 2019). Industrial activities are mostly found in engagement with the immediate spatial context as merely a location for its activities characterized by profit and mobility (Korsgaard, S. et al., 2015). There are less concerns about the environment and development of the region. There are evidences of exploitation of natural resources and shut down of industries once the incentives, scheme, and subsidies in the regions end. Uttarakhand is one such example. Chand, R. et al. (2017) mentioned that the non-agricultural sector, mainly manufacturing, which shifted to the rural areas, could not bring significant employment gains or reduction in disparity in rural India. Further, potential tensions also surround any such development drive: who will move forward and gain profit from new development? Will it be investors or grass root farmers or the population who have conserved the environment so far? (Van der Ploeg et al., 2000). The urban based development with focus on industrialization may not benefit the region satisfactorily. Hence, this is becoming an ever more serious question that how should the northeast economy deal with the challenges of continued peripherality, low income and less economic activities.

The intent of the paper is to raise the question: do the regions really need the fast and high growth in the way that others achieved? It should not necessarily be the ambition. Rather the focus should be on enhancement of the quality of the place and life of the people and enhancement of the value of localized resources. The cultural hierarchy that considers urbanity and industrialization as a positive trait and rurality as a negative one (Shahraki, H. and Heydari, E., 2019) needs to be changed. Korsgaard, S. et al. (2015) mentioned a place more than a simple location; it is constituted by the practices that take place in a location. It is the part where people are directly linked with natural resources to earn livelihood (the way to make a living) and lifestyles their balances the regional problems (Tejaram, N., 2017; Siemens, 2014). The festivals and celebrations in the North-eastern states of India are a colourful reflection of the people and their lives. Throughout the year, different people celebrate festivals with lot of fanfare in different ways, most of them centering around their modes of living and livelihood. Therefore, the development of the region should be in its own way and as per its environmental and geographical climate.

North-East Region

Northeast India (officially the North Eastern Region (NER)) is the easternmost region of India comprising eight states—Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura (commonly known as the "Seven Sisters"), and the "brother" state Sikkim. The region shares an international border of 5,182 kilometres (about 99 percent of its total geographical boundary) with several neighbouring countries – 1,395 kilometres with China in the north, 1,640 kilometres with Myanmar in the east, 1,596 kilometres with Bangladesh in the south-west, 97 kilometres with Nepal in the west, and 455 kilometres with Bhutan in the north-west. It comprises an area of 262,184 square kilometres, almost 8 percent of that of India. It is one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse regions in Asia. Each state has its distinct cultures and traditions. Each state is a traveller's paradise, with picturesque hills and green meadows which shelter thousands of species of flora and fauna.

The North East is a true frontier region and is connected to the rest of India by a narrow 20 km wide corridor of land. The Siliguri Corridor connects the region to the rest of mainland India. Geographically, apart from the Brahmaputra, Barak and Imphal valleys and some flatlands in between the hills of Meghalaya and Tripura, the remaining two-thirds of the area is hilly terrain interspersed with valleys and plains; the altitude varies from almost sea-level to over 7,000 metres (23,000 ft) above MSL.

Development Strategy

There is an assumption that the economic growth in the mountainous rural areas is exogenous by attracting capital from other areas or most popularly industrial attraction efforts or to relocate firms through various financial incentives (Deller, S. et al., 2019; Lowe, P. et al., 2019). But this exogenous development strategy is against making regions self-sufficient. The declining effectiveness of industrial allocation as well as the failure of other rural development strategies has encouraged a gradual shift to endogenous efforts leveraging local strengths, knowledge and expertise (Deller, S. et al., 2019). Therefore, there should be a development approach if not isolated, at least less dependent on external forces.

The key to the development in the region is the local participation and locally established economic opportunities (Dzvimbo, M. A. et al., 2017; Lopez, M., 2019). Development model in the region must analyse the possible cooperation and contradictions that are emerging between environment and development factors. The most fit model for the region may be the **Bioregional model**. This model acclaims subsistence regions with flexible production systems and production based on local needs, small enterprises and decentralized management. Lowe, P. (2019) coined a term “*Vernacular Expertise*” related to it ‘an expertise that is place based, place generated and place focused’. The LEADER (Liaison Entre Actions de Development de Rurale) programme of the European Union is one of such examples to learn from which provides funding for area-based local strategies to induce regional development (Martin, P., 2013).

But, to implement such development programs there is a requirement for finance at workable scale rather than microloans; there is a need for fostering job-creating entrepreneurship rather than subsistence livelihoods (Basole, A. and Chandy, V., 2019). While the northeast communities need financial services the most, they remain the largest unreserved market for financial services. The credit-deposit ratio of regional rural banks in the North-Eastern region in the year 2021 is only 38.3 percent in comparison to 71.4 percent at the all-India level (RBI, 2021). Ensuring the financial inclusion of north-east communities can unlock considerable economic potential of the area.

Economic diversification in this region (NER) can take many forms including retailing (e.g., organic farm shops, craft centres, food processing etc.), sports and recreation (e.g., outdoor, informal, water based and equestrian activities), services (workshops, education), green energy hub and tourism (see figure 1). There is a need to see the region and its assets as active agents rather than passive beneficiaries of government policies (Lowe P. and Ward, N., 2007). The mixture of local identity and place-based knowledge and skills can play a central role in the formation of rural businesses. It is important that this pluri-activity be seen as integral part of development in the region. The requirement is to engage with the environment of the place; to create value using local resources for the upliftment of the rural economy. Development in the region should be multifaceted- landscape management, the conservation of nature values, Agri-tourism, organic farming and the production of high quality and region-specific products. Small labour-intensive manufacturing rather than large one can play important role in employment generation (Dutta, S., 2020).

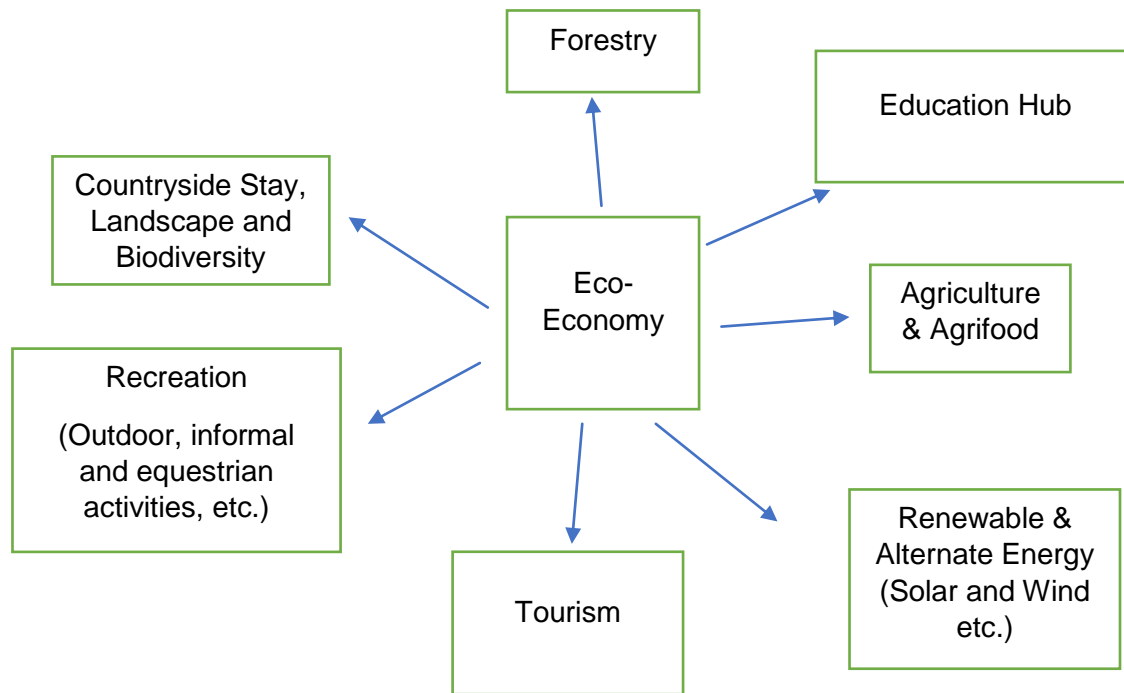


Figure 1: Bio-regional / Eco-economy Model

North-eastern states provide scope for angling, boating, rafting, trekking and hiking. Besides, there are a number of wildlife sanctuaries and national parks where rare animals, birds and plants which will surely provide fascinating insight to the visitors. It is recommended to make the region attractive, focus on identifying local and regional assets, move towards the work with people approach which respects the primacy of the people, to guarantee social well-being and sustainable development (Lopez, M. et al., 2019). There should be promotion of distinct territorial, local and/or regional quality food or other products. There is a need to commoditise local culture, local breeds, varieties and revalorise place through its cultural identity for the development of entrepreneurship and innovation (Stathopoulou, S., 2004). To conserve the environment and identity of the region, we need to contemplate the development in the region with community participation, locally established economic opportunities, and reinforcement of regional identity. The initiatives from within the society and region may be sustainable and more beneficial for the region. Without

economic vitality, other factors that make living attractive such as health, social services, education, housing, or transport facilities cannot be developed and sustained in the long run.

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