

## A CHANGE STILL TO COME

Relevant for: Indian Polity & Constitution | Topic: Issues and challenges pertaining to the Federal Structure

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The north-eastern region (NER) has been placed on a pedestal for the purposes of central assistance, subsidies and exemptions. The epithet of "special category states" allows a more liberal resource transfer dispensation for the eight states on account of their historical backwardness, geographical remoteness, sparse population, difficult terrain and strategic location. Income Tax Act exemptions are provided for Scheduled Tribe (ST) residents of Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Tripura, the hill districts of North Cachar, Mikir, Khasi, Garo areas. The constitutional principles of affirmative action have afforded greater access to higher education and government jobs to the ST population. The cumulative impact of these interventions has brought about substantial change, though several challenges remain.

The literacy rate of all the states of NER was more than the national average in 2011 census, the highest being Mizoram at 91.3 per cent. In 1961, all the states were below the national average, barring Assam, Manipur and Mizoram. The sex ratio of the states of the NER was more than the national average in 2011, except Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh. In 1961, only Manipur and Mizoram had a sex ratio higher than the national average. The infant mortality in 2016 was well below national average, with Manipur being the lowest at 11 deaths per 1,000 live births. The poverty ratio in NER in 1993-94 was above the national average for six of the eight states. In 2011-12, all the states of the NER had poverty ratio (as per Tendulkar Committee estimates) less than the national average, except Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. These indicators suggest a significant transformation.

However, a deeper analysis reveals a different story. As per U-DISE 2016-17, the drop out rate from primary schools is the highest in NER, the worst in Arunachal Pradesh at 23.6 per cent. Drop-out rates at the upper-primary level are equally bad amongst these states, barring Assam. The NER has the highest percentage of poor quality rural classrooms in the country. The All India Survey of Higher Education report 2017-18 points out that the gross enrollment ratio in higher education for five out of the eight NER states is below the national average of 25.8 per cent.

In the health sector, NFHS-4 data points out that the percentage of institutional deliveries is the lowest in this region except in Sikkim, Mizoram and Tripura, which are doing fairly well. Let us also not lose sight of the fact that Manipur has the highest adult prevalence of HIV in the country, followed by Mizoram and Nagaland. High tobacco consumption, poor hygiene and dietary habits are the primary cause of cancer — the incidence rates being double of national average — making the Northeast the cancer capital of India. The absence of adequate diagnostic and treatment facilities make matters worse, especially for the poor.

Connectivity has been the proverbial Achilles' Heel for the Northeast. On this front, there are visible signs of change, with the rapid construction of national highways, bridges, rail and air linkages. The iconic Bhupen Hazarika bridge and the nearly complete Bogibeel rail-road bridge are emblematic of hope. The recently-commissioned airports at Pakyong in Sikkim and Pasighat in Arunachal Pradesh have given wings to economic possibilities. Rural infrastructure and connectivity have seen a significant improvement under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana and Border Area Development Programme, though the quality of road infrastructure, especially state highways and rural roads remains quite pathetic. Torrential monsoon rains and mudslides make the task of road maintenance even more challenging.

On the employment front, the work participation rate in the NER is higher than the national average of 39.79 per cent, except Assam, which is marginally lower. The female work participation rate of most of the NER is far above the national average. However, there is an excessive dependence on government jobs. The tribal societies of the Northeast tend to be closely knit along lines of kinship and ethnicity. As a result, the educated youth are do not prefer relocating for jobs. Experiences of racial prejudice and discrimination in other parts of India have made matters worse.

The bigger challenge lies in harnessing private investment and catalysing home-grown entrepreneurship. The credit-deposit ratio of scheduled commercial banks in the NER is the lowest in the country. This is partly attributable to the complex land laws of the region, which are an overlay of customary rights (of clans and communities) over modern laws (conferring individual rights). As a result, a land titling exercise is yet to be undertaken in most states. In the absence of a clear land title as collateral, banks hesitate to lend and credible investors remain wary. Liberalisation of the regulatory framework around land holdings would help monetise the biggest resource of this region. Inner line regulations, based on a British-era law applicable in some hill states, also need to be simplified to make access easier for tourists and investors.

Winds of change are sweeping the Northeast, yet it will be a while before the states can shed their “special” tag. A competition-based resource allocation framework may help incentivise improvements in outcomes.

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