

**National Workshop  
North East India Today: Some Reflections**

**Text of Speech**

**Speaker: Shri R. Vijaykumar, PhD, IAS, Secretary, Ministry of DoNER**

**Venue:** Department of Sociology, Delhi School of Economics

**Date :** 1030 AM, 12.3.2015

I have been asked to speak on my perceptions drawn from my administrative experiences. These are small – a visit during my tenure with the NCST and visits, discussions, interactions with officials, politicians and the public over the last six months in a few States.

2. Considering the venerable character of this audience – by age or by way of hours spent on studying social phenomena including in the North East, my views may perhaps be simplistic but I would still press ahead based on four inter related categories: Political, Sociological, &Administrative, and Economic.

3. As you know, India gave itself its Constitution to bring together a diverse set of communities, power centres and individuals to guarantee among other things, certain rights to individuals to develop their capacities to the fullest extent. That this experiment is still in progress in many areas even outside the north east is perhaps evident with groups organized on lines of caste and region to better access the structures of policy either for direct benefits or for reservations, etc. In a way this appears to find relation to Stein's segmentation hypothesis and poses a challenge to the focus on the individual. The problem of the north east is that they became full States under Schedule I of the Constitution much later and have had lesser time to mature. The churning that the rest of the nation saw in previous centuries is perhaps less in this area. Therefore, each State in the North East is an agglomeration of tribes, some with distinct geographies and some scattered around a central dense group. With larger members, some of these tribes dominate the rest especially in their ability to articulate needs and to



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command greater attention of the Central Government by way of representation, employment, funds, etc.

4. Therefore, when Panchayati Raj was formed, only some relatively mainstream areas could be covered while strong communities in the remaining areas especially in the hills resisted this political arrangement, preferring their traditional village councils. With subsequent developments, we now have as many as 10 Autonomous District Councils in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution and another 12 Autonomous District Councils as legislated by States. The creation of these bodies has left the traditional village councils untouched. Unfortunately, these Autonomous Councils have been assigned responsibilities but have not developed the capacity to operate them effectively despite many years of relative autonomy. I use the term relative because there exists a trust deficit and lack of coordination between the state government operating as a power centre and these bodies covering a smaller geographical area.

5. Linked with this aspect which I also noticed during my visit as Secretary of the NCST to Kohima and Khonoma early last year, was an evident problem of internal equity. This contrasts with the celebration of communitisation by my colleague, Shri Parikh in Nagaland. I hasten to add that strong communities enable better administration in some ways. Collective action such as in water users' associations, watershed groups and in areas that I will later mention, are ready benefits. However, it also poses questions on the ability of its members to query power.

6. After all, our Constituent Assembly debated essentially this very aspect with the oft-quoted remark of Ambedkar that underwrites the reach of larger society and the State inside the village community to the poor, women, children and the oppressed. If this capacity to reach in is denied by atavistic formations, then two conclusions emerge: in the first place, inclusion in the Indian State is essentially by acceptance of the Philosophy of the



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Constitution and this might well constitute a rejection of that principle. Second, is the fact that most of us can sense when we visit the North East and interact with the students and working migrants in other parts of the country. Even their very change in dressing patterns as they move from village to State Capital to Delhi, etc could be taken to be a protest as well as a harbinger of the rapid change that is ongoing in North East society.

7. Another factor also seems to be at work. If one considers the present state of youth in the north east, one sees well-educated or literate persons. However, post-school education is not comparable with the rest of the country. What then, are the prospects for youth?

8. Governments in the north east are under tremendous fiscal stress. They have a large proportion of the employed population in each State on Government rolls. Markets are dominated by outsiders or those who have logistics linkages to the rest of the country. It is argued that things were better before 1971 but seen from this aspect of local enterprise and entrepreneurship, this claim seems suspect.

9. It is perhaps then little surprising that youth in the north east have a sense of anomie and far from a genuine need for participation in the political process as part of their university education, they instead block roads, announce hartals on a multitude of issues that are essentially complex and rightly need mature consideration of the concerned State and local Governments.

10. Within this context, is the undeniable fact that the Government of India has massively invested in the North East for the past twenty years. While infrastructure has improved and more peaceful conditions obtain, a problem has arisen in the structures of power and society through which this fund flow has taken place. There is evidence, perhaps anecdotal, of inequitous capital accumulation. Many of the better educated or better off or both especially from the more powerful elements in society have prospered.



But they have not shared this prosperity. They are said to constitute most of the migrants to the rest of the country and are not returning as champions of change. This only adds to the anomie and bitterness among the youth left behind.

11. Coming to gender issues, women are respected in North East society. They do farming and nearly all the hard work. However, only men seem to dominate the political echelons of North East society. I had once written a paper on the dialectical relationship between a woman's position in the family and in the State. Perhaps a study for the North East would be interesting.

12. I will not dwell much on the problems of administration. However, if a region has few institutions of higher education, the quality of debate and reflexiveness would be low. Accordingly, the opportunity to dwell on problems of the north east will be relatively less if persons had to travel to other parts of the country for study. A singular attachment to the idea of community also undercuts professional conduct by resort to nepotism, overlooking administrative misconduct, and a reinforcement of hierarchy. The outsider is also seen as an interloper to be resisted rather than as a potential contributor. Progress in building capacity, therefore, slows down and raises great challenges for such of us who work in the region.

13. The most amazing thing that hits you between the eyes is, however, the lack of economic institutions as we may see in the rest of the country. As I said before, markets are dominated by outsiders. Since people's expectations have increased, markets have responded with goods brought in from the rest of the country and little is manufactured within the region. Farm products are made or processed outside with raw materials drawn from within the region and supplied without even minimal cleaning. There is a shortage of basic foods-rice, meat including pork, fish and chicken, which is a surprise since the land itself appears to be one of milk and honey. One



aspect of the solution is the need for develop infrastructure – the logistics to reach the market beyond. The Government has decided to do this with greater emphasis on funding but also on timely and effective delivery. Another aspect is on creating some economic institutions that can expand people’s livelihoods in terms of products and incomes but also in terms of their control over their environment and lives. We have proposed an ‘Anand Pattern in Organic Farming’ comprising women farmers as our design for Mission Organic North East and we hope to build people’s capacities to sustain and expand their livelihoods and explore future opportunities. For this we build on community strengths.

14. I have in my talk attempted to identify some political, sociological, administrative and economic issues and set them in the context of the rapid change that appears to be occurring in North East society and especially driven by its youth. Muddling through is a possible route but I believe strong action to create participatory economic institutions may enable growth in capacity and of the economy. Although the process of entrepreneurship development and industrialisation of the region cannot be predicted, it seems possible that the steps that we are taking may lead the way to a brighter future for the youth of the North East.

15. I, therefore, complement the Department of Sociology of the DSE for organizing this National Workshop to inaugurate this North East India Studies Programme and for inviting me to share my views with this distinguished audience.

Thank you.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ugyanlo", with a horizontal line underneath it.

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