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Civil Society and Governance in the Northeast India: Some Mizoram Reflections*

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Abstract: The study of social sciences and humanities in the context of northeast India is a prerequisite that helps to understand and analyse the state and non-state institutions. These institutions largely shape the governance and development of the northeast regions. More than the state and government it is civil society and its various institutions that played instrumental role in the participatory democracy. And, it promotes the communitarian life styles in the states like Mizoram, to be more explicit. Specifically, this paper identifies the 'emerging trends' in governance initiatives within the unique socio-cultural and geographical context of Northeast India. This paper is aimed at highlighting the role of civil society in the governance and development of Mizoram and similar other states of northeast India. It is briefly explicated in terms of a few reflections thereof.

Distinct Northeast India

At the outset, unlike the mainstream Indian states and regions, northeast regions are distinct and unique. Geographically located in the remote corners of India, the region is largely hilly terrain. Deprived of industrial facilities like the hard infrastructure, the regional people have yet not developed economically. Culturally rich communities, as these are known to be, on account of their age-old traditions and customary practices continue to combine tradition with modernity. While religion plays the predominant actor in different dimensions of their lives, Christianity has been the common religious denominator that connected the lives and struggles in most of the north-eastern states. Undoubtedly, it is the most popular religion in the region. Notwithstanding multiple Christian denominations being coexisted, local communities have been contented with their respective religious denominations. Local church institutions and their leadership offer them many an opportunity to get together on a regular basis so as to ensure social and communal harmony. Besides, multitude of social and cultural institutions plays catalytic role as civil societies and thereby promote the healthy socio-cultural life.

Northeast life style is marked by communitarian values that present different images. Identity issues like ethnicity, tribalism, geography, language, culture and life style are there largely to

contribute to the emergence of civil societies in the region. These civil societies play major role in the social life and political struggles of the local communities. More than the political parties and groups, the local civil societies impact the political process as well. Civil societies do impart requisite education, political and otherwise. Political awareness level is exemplary in the region. Not because of their high literacy and modernization process that they are politically conscious, but because of the civil society initiatives that the local communities had become part of the political process. As part of political process, elections and political activities have been influenced by the civil societies. Giving space for identity and autonomy issues, the civil societies have invariably influenced the politics in the region. In consequence, civil society has played an instrumental role in the governance and development of these states.

Civil Society and Governance

In different stages of policy making process, be it policy formulation, policy implementation, or policy outcome, public policy scrutiny through the eyes of civil society is a prevalent phenomenon everywhere in the world. According to Neera Chandhoke (2003), civil society is a "space where people in association with others can debate and contest their version of the political, and hold states responsible and ensure accountability from state officials". And, tthe World Bank (2003) defines it as "the wide array of nongovernmental and not-for profit organizations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations". Accordingly, Civil society mean different things to different people. For, the context of the studying civil society can be understood as a space where people come into association with each other, representing and working towards their common good.

Some observers believe that the changing landscape of policy making from a 'top-down, state-centric approach, to a more negotiated domain of policy making involving non-state actors' has provided more space to civil society organizations that partake more proactively in policy processes in India. Due to its rich diversity, there exist a wide range of civil society organizations in the country. Suffice it to cite a case of the Anna Hazare movement against corruption that ultimately ensured the Lokpal Bill becoming an act in 2013. Besides these there exist numerous other cases where civil society actors have affected the policy process be it at the national, state or grassroots levels. In the Northeast states of Nagaland and Mizoram, there exist a vibrant civil society groups whose presence in governance is upward over the years.

Whereas, the Governance is one of the trendiest and recurrently used terms today. The word is also often used in various studies, and it is commonly used by adding a particular prefix, such as good governance, global governance, corporate governance, multi-level governance, and new governance. Governance today encompasses beyond the administrative structure. And, it focuses on the formal and informal institutions involved in decision-making and implementation processes. The concept of governance or good governance was not recognized in the past, but the term holds a very inclusive character in the welfare administration of any society. Governance requires the contributions and efforts of various stakeholders. It is understood that governance and development are interrelated and closely linked. The development of a country or region depends on governance efforts. Obviously, no significant development can take place if there is hardly any efficient and effective governance. Then, governance is the primary factor that occupie the basic structure. Hence, for governance to be effective, active involvement, participation, interaction, and decision-making among the players, whether or not government institutions, formal or informal organizations, are the prerequisites for creating an environment of collective rules and laws. In fact, good governance requires the proactive participation of different stakeholders, which reliably enhances development outcomes. In other words, the term governance received wide recognition and influenced the world of late with the publication of World Bank approach paper in 1989, dealing with the long-term aid-cum loan program. (Pathi, 2014). The World Bank's definition of governance primarily focuses on the institutions and procedures of traditional government reform and can be considered a prescriptive character in the governance strategy. Viewed in this backdrop, the following reflections that explain the civil society-politics interface in the context of Mizoram and northeast Indian governance can be considered.

Civil Society-Governance Interface Reflections

1. The 'Northeast', soft infrastructure is rich and geographically distinctive. Since the region is of hilly terrain, hard infrastructure is yet not developed to any extent. While plain areas have their own natural advantage, the hilly terrains are at a physical disadvantage. Developing the hard-infrastructural facilities like the roads and buildings is very difficult and of course costly. However, the soft infrastructure that comprises of local communities and their communitarian life styles is better than what it exists outside northeast regions. Incidentally, the Northeast is smacked of multitude of peculiar issues and contained concerns that deserve special focus of study. Besides lack of the physical connectivity and communicational issues that impede the process of integration of communities,

intercommunity and intra-community rivalries contribute to conflicts and strife. Due to coexistence of multiple communities having ethnic and tribal diversities, the region has been faced with many a challenge. Certainly, they deserve attention of the powers that be.

2. The NEI assumes lot of significance in the stream of Indian political studies. Although the region contributes to the scarce proportion of national geography and population, its political representation attracts the political leadership. Faced with depleting political space in the context of mainstream India, the northeast region aspires for better representation. Thus, there is a need of devising some mechanisms whereby northeast voices are duly represented beyond their proportional share. The Northeast societies have been influenced by non-political dimensions more than the others. In contrast to the prevalent mainstream political processes, northeast is known for favouring non-political dimensions. More than the political actors, non-political ones like the civil society organisations (CSOs) are there indulging in political processes in the region. Not only that these CSOs undermine the political parties and their political role, but also impart non-political instruction to the local masses.
3. Ethnicity, tribalism, Christianity and communitarian life style play bigger role in shaping the political development in the region. These socio-cultural and religious institutions since raising the CSOs also they shape the political process in the region. Unlike the political parties, the CSOs are there scheming the political awareness of their populace. Whether or not such political instruction is worth doing, the local communities are less dependable on their political institutions. At times, the political parties and their frontal organizations seem to be clueless as to how the political process is promoted in the region. Civil society initiatives are predominant that always positively contributed to the public life. While the political parties are envious of the CSOs that were hijacking the political role, the civil society initiatives cannot but be appreciated. There are numerous ways in which the CSOs play their part in the northeast region. In a way these initiatives are aimed at promoting public welfare and social development in Mizoram and elsewhere in the region. Thus, it is understandable why their multi-dimensional role in the governance of the state has been commended.
4. As usual women constitute half of any population, including that of northeast. Women activism is discernible more in socio-economic and cultural activities. Yet, its spread is hardly touched upon political dimension to a large extent in Mizoram, for instance. Women contribute bigger share towards socio-economic development of the region. However, when it comes to the political dimension, their participation is marginal. Although their

participation is confined to just voting in the elections, if not contesting, political representation is hardly positive. Women have been lagging behind more in the northeast political process. Of course, patriarchy is a universal phenomenon that affect all regions in the country. But its implications are far more in Mizoram and this region. Several factors can be attributed for women's political backwardness. Besides their personal, family and community backdrops, it is the CSOs that come in the way of women politicisation. Yet, women can be inspired to move ahead in the politics today.

5. Political parties and institutions are sensitive to the aspirations and needs of the local population, yet the political leadership hardly attracts the prospective leaders. Always, political parties and their leaders seem to focus on socio-political movements and thereby organize several activities. Thanks to the politicization of the voters and masses, their political consciousness is enhanced over the years. In the context of this region, political leadership is hardly identified and improved thereof. Thus, there is a scarcity of political leadership to a large extent. Peaceful elections at all levels are smacked of high participation that could hardly be matched elsewhere in India. And, voters are activated when it comes to the polling percentage in the elections. What motivates them to duly exercise their franchise is beside the point. And, they play their electoral duty without any voting incentives, be they money, liquor and other material benefits. Perhaps, the local CSOs like the Mizoram Peoples Forum are instrumental in appealing the voters to comply with peaceful electoral norms. Certainly, this is a good electoral practice that could be emulated elsewhere in India.
6. In any democratic government, people and their vigilant role in the electoral and political process is crucial in ensuring proper governance. As long as the people are alert and proactive on the governments and their rule, good governance could be conceivable. In the northeast, popular vigilance on the governmental activities is discernible so that the governments could be held responsible for their words and deeds. Once again, local CSOs are found playing their part towards ensuring good governance in this direction. So, good governance, attributable to the law-abiding nature of the citizens besides the role of CSOs, can become a catalyst for regional development in the long run.
7. Socio-religious and cultural studies largely impact the educational standing of the youth and students. Despite the fact that the northeast regions had been described as not just ethnic and tribal-based societies, but also highly religious and cultural ones, they are influenced with western ethos, Christian values and modern education systems. As much as they are modernized that much educational awareness is noticed. Thus, one can acknowledge why

their interest in enhancing their educational level is more than the others. Suffice it cite the case of high literacy levels in states like Mizoram and Nagaland in the region. It is time they convert such literacy levels into educational levels. Given their high literacy rates, competitive skill of the students and job aspirants deserve to be sharpened.

Of late, with the rise of globalization trends, the northeast Indian states have to be cognizant of requisite conditions so as to grab more opportunities than what they were prevalent before, outside Mizoram and northeast. Governance challenges have to be revised accordingly as to overcome them with support of civil society thereof. Of course, their communitarian life styles that give primacy to fellow feeling more than the others seem to be restricting them to be confined to their regions alone. One can witness this sort of communitarian trend being evident at all levels in most of these societies. Certainly, this sort of inflexible trend is considered a disablement in the process of outside exposure. Neither they encourage outsiders to settle down in the region, nor are they comfortable to migrate to outside areas. Perhaps, this is the precise reason why the 'Inner Line Permit (ILP)' is required to enter, leave alone settle down, here in several states of the region.

Conclusion

Keeping in view of these Northeast Indian governance reflections, the local youth and women are expected to reorient their priorities and explore the marketable opportunities to strengthen the economic base of the society and states in a time bound manner. Notwithstanding the hilly terrain handicaps, regional developments have to be focused on highlighting the role of civil society in boosting thee governance prospects and thereby promoting wealth generation projects through exploring natural resources and tourism in the days to come. While there are areas where the civil society played positive role in the governance process, there are also some negative areas that disturb the governance and development in the region. Ultimately, thanks to civil society cooperation, their good governance and economic development would lead to their social and community development once for all.

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