



The Statesman

The first completely customisable news site on the web
132 years in print



Search

in The Statesman Web

Search

Advanced Search

Wednesday, 14 June 2007

[Home](#) | [Classified](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Matrimonials](#) | [Archives](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Feedback](#) | [About Us](#)

News

[Page one](#)
[India](#)
[World](#)
[Editorial](#)
[Perspective](#)
[Business](#)
[Sport](#)
[Bengal](#)

Magazine

[Sports & Leisure](#)
[Career & Campus](#)
[Science & Technology](#)
[Voices](#)
[Lifestyle](#)
[Kolkata Plus](#)
[Bengal Plus](#)
[Unplugged](#)
[Viewpoint](#)
[North East Page](#)
[Orissa Plus](#)
[Note Book](#)
[N.B & Sikkim Plus](#)
[Entertainment](#)
[NB Extra](#)
[World Focus](#)


[\[Archives\]](#)
[Back to archives for 2007-06-11](#)
[\[North East Page\]](#)

Real 'North-east dilemma'

Rajesh Dev

THE term "North-east" has become a cliché, wedged in the national imagination as an antinomy that elicits accusatory admonishment as well as paternalistic charity. While official strategists-turned-social scientists, in an attempt to erase historical memories, accuse the "region" of being responsible for its contemporary crises, policy planners and "development specialists" argue in favour of more material endowments to the "region" to offset its deficits and enable its integration with the "mainstream", without any appreciation of the dynamics between embedded identities, institutional templates and a share of the development entitlements.

But is there a common collective identity that can be termed "North-east", a regional identity that has communal margins that erase their identities as separate states in the federal state of India? Why do we not refer to the other parts of the country with similar "regional" references that is a collective entity? Is this reference to congeries of states collectively as "North-east" a justified designation or is it a political and economic euphemism emerging from the dilemmas of the antinomy?

The "region" of "North-east" is perceived as a crucible where conflicts emerging from mismanaged diversity are open to investigation for politico-ethnographic documentation and where policy initiatives intended to moderate diversity are provided a locale for arranged experimentation. In other words, it has become the novel focus of advocates and promoters of varied hues. Accordingly, we have area-study specialists often self-designated as "North-east experts" mapping the "specialities" of the "region"; post-colonial ethnographers inspired by a reformulated orientalist prism involved in deciphering an authentic essentialist core of the diversity in the "region"; development

News Flash



Login


Username

Password

Login

[New user? Sign-in](#)



India Yellow Pages
Ahmedabad
Bangalore
Chennai
Delhi /NCR
Hyderabad
Kolkata
Mumbai
Pune
 Sulekha.com Yellow Pages

experts proposing common blueprints for progressive economic “growth” of the “region”; activists of all shades interrogating state-sponsored initiatives as attempts to effect forcible loyalty of the “region”; and actors and institutional managers of the state oblivious to the gradations and materiality of plurality and diversity propose initiatives for a collective standardised “regional” transformation.

What we find portrayed eventually is a “North-east” that is collectively either a “paradise unexplored” — when one needs to sell it to an orientalist customer, or more typically as “conflict-ridden” — when the state needs to strategise non-democratic initiatives to contain violent defiance. In both these connotations there is an implicit suggestion of an essential “core” that the “region” commonly possesses and reflects. The implicit assumption is that there is an innate, natural, uncontested and fixed content through which the “region” can be represented and also reproduced. In the sense of the “paradise unexplored”, the “region” evokes an exoticised mystery that is arcane and enigmatic. A tangible expression of such exoticisation is revealed in the increasing vulnerability of “North-east” women in cities like Delhi due to their exotic features that often conjures images of desirability and explains the rising crime graph against them or even in the observation of fashion designers that “North-eastern” girls evoke an exotic sensuality that would be so much appreciated by the gaze of the fashion world. Contrarily, in the sense of the “conflict-ridden” connotation this incomprehensible mystery evokes a political suspicion that becomes the dominant rhetorical trope for justifying “normalising” and “controlling” efforts of the “periphery”, revealed in the execution of laws like the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act and the choice of former Army generals and Intelligence officials as governors whose loyalty is only to the “Centre”.

Even scholars representing the region, regardless of their scepticism about such collective designation called “North-east” and their belief that such descriptions do not evoke any historical memory or collective consciousness, attempt to replicate this collective misnomer by incredulously suggesting that this “region” is evidently allied by a “durable disorder” or a “periphery” that is able to “strike back”. A “disorder” in a “periphery” that innumerable ethnic groups ensconced within a common geographical typography but at varied stages of historical and political evolution collectively experience and express in their attempts at locating their social and political relevance within a shared national self-consciousness. The experience of common ambiguities and anxieties that ethno-cultural groups engaged in asserting and recovering their selfhood confront in the process of their negotiations with the state or with proximate ethno-cultural groups in the “region” is another astute expression of this commonness.

As such this common predicament of “collective disorder” supposedly provides the “region” its identifiable essence and erases the bewildering

heterogeneity of ethno-cultural identities and groups in the constituent states, necessitating a shared designation and standardised prescriptions. Nonetheless, we may hazard the suggestion that without much clarity about what constitutes this “North-east”, we have incorporated a number of separate states within a homogenising conceptual grid and forcibly provided it with a collective identity that fails to express the diversity, ethos and autonomy of each of the constituents. The hangover of an essentialist frame wedded to a patronising attitude girded within a perception of violent yet esoteric societies has possibly imbued this collective frame called “North-east” its referential basis, incongruously reinforced and internalised by a conditioned repetition. The upshot of such a collective misnomer is that the “region” has become a rigmarole of proposals and procedures, intentions and initiatives too chaotic and standardised to reflect their impression on the separate constituents and their specific requirements. It may be worthwhile that we refocus our approach towards the individual states of the “region” and view them not as a common cultural artefact or a collective commercial entity but as federating states of India, each distinctive and irreplaceable.

(The author — a lecturer in Political Science at Women’s College Shillong and executive secretary of the Advanced Research Group for Understanding Eastern India — can be contacted at rajesh@argueindia.org.)