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PEACE AUDIT NORTHEAST A ROADMAP TO RESTORE NORMALCY

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Views expressed in this essay are the author's own.



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PEACE AUDIT NORTHEAST

A ROADMAP TO RESTORE NORMALCY

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Northeast India has had a history of numerous conflicts since the early 1950s. There have been, at the same time, several peace initiatives from time to time on the said conflict situations. These initiatives, however, ended mostly in failure. In the days of yore, the North East was an idyllic place of peace, tranquility and happiness. Although economic prosperity in the modern sense of the term was not much visible in this corner of our sub-continent, people here were happy and easy-going because they had fewer needs and still lesser aspirations. Peace used to get breached now and then only when kings and chieftains fought among themselves, group-wise, for some reason or the other. However, owing to differences in ways of life and customs as well as lack of communication as between them, various ethnic groups in the great Brahmaputra and the Barak plains and the hills and mountains sandwiching the plains lived more or less an isolated life as though in separate compartments, though not entirely as strangers to one another. One factor that made a somewhat common meeting point for the ethnic communities in the North East was the Assamese language in the Brahmaputra valley and the Bengali language in the Barak valley. These languages helped, to some extent, the growth of an understanding and interaction among the ethnic communities inhabiting the land in isolated pockets and areas.

The British rule in the North East encompassing the then province of Assam and the princely states of Manipur and Tripura had its beginning with the signing of the Yandaboo treaty in 1826 in the wake of a series of predatory invasions of Assam, and later of Manipur, by the Burmese from across the border. The invaders had come to Assam across the formidable Patkai Mountains. A very large chunk of the population of the Brahmaputra valley had perished in mindless atrocities perpetrated by the Burmese in the short span of the latter's occupation of the valley in the early 19th century. Thus the British came to Assam at that moment as a saviour. They opened up avenues for economic development of the region by setting up the tea industry, exploring oil and coal and extending railway lines in the valleys and across the hills between them.

The British government in India, for various reasons of its own – some strategic, some political and some purely commercial - did not make any

effort to integrate the plainsmen and the hill-men. They kept the impenetrable mountains and forests in the north-east of the North East – the present day Arunachal Pradesh - out of bounds for everybody, obviously for strategic reasons. Even Christian missionaries were not allowed to move in there. However, they allowed the missionaries to enter the Naga Hills, the Lushai (present Mizo) Hills, the K & J Hills and the Garo Hills, which have all attained separate entities in rapid succession within the first four decades of the country's independence, thanks to the internal dissensions within the undivided state of Assam. The alien government had put in place in 1873 an instrument, called the Inner Line Permit system (ILP), to put a barrier between the plains and the hills. No one from the plains was allowed to enter the hills where the system was in force without permission from the authorities. Thus owing to the lack of free contact, hill-tribes and plainsmen remained somewhat distant from one another.

The first group of tribes to cultivate an idea of separation from Assam was the Nagas, the idea having its genesis in the formation of the Naga Club in 1918. It pleaded with the Simon Commission in the late 1920s for a separate identity for Nagas in the Indian constitutional framework that was being worked out by the British government in the run-up to the enactment of the Government of India Act 1935. The early 1940s saw the germination and growth of the Naga National Council (NNC) under the leadership of the legendary Naga leader, AZ Phizo, and this led to the outbreak of an armed insurrection by a self-styled Naga army in the then Naga Hills district of Assam. The upheaval profoundly affected the contiguous Sibsagar and Nowgong districts as well as North Cachar Hills and Mikir Hills of the then undivided Assam in terms of loss of life and property. The contribution to this turn of events of the departing British officers (ICS) working in the area at the time of India's Independence has been quite significant in so far as they initially planted the idea of a 'crown colony' for the Nagas to be under the direct control of the British government in London. However, the Nagas rejected the scheme after a while and asked for complete independence from India.

The mother of all insurgencies in the country has been the one in Nagaland. After a long blood bath in the conflict, there was a peace initiative – the first of its kind in the country - in the mid-1960s, led by Lok Nayak Jayaprakash Narayan. He was assisted in the effort by the then Chief Minister of Assam, late BP Chaliha and one Mr Michael Scott representing the Christian viewpoint. What was their brief is not known but it is certain that the mission never really took off. This unfortunately set a trend for peace initiatives in the mushrooming insurgencies in the region since then, though there has been an exception – that of the Mizo rebellion, which ended in a lasting peace accord in 1986. The Mizo Accord fortunately remains a bright example of how differences can be resolved through talks. Militancy in the region has always been aided and a good deal abetted by India's main geo-strategic adversary, China, and till the liberation of Bangladesh, by an intransigent Pakistan (through the then East Pakistan).

The irredentism of a section of Assam's intelligentsia in their quest for political and intellectual primacy brought in the declaration of Assamese language first as the only 'official language of the state' (in 1960) and then as the 'medium of instruction' at university level (in 1972) to the exclusion of other languages in the State. The intellectuals were oblivious of the fact that unlike other States in India which were more or less uni-lingual, Assam had a very composite populace speaking in a number of languages and dialects and the majority of them were not at home in Assamese. The late BP Chaliha had ardently pointed to this reality but was over-ruled. The fact that fierce movements for creation of separate states in the geographic bounds of Assam started almost immediately after 1960 indicates that the move on the language question had a negative impact on the unity of Assam's plural polity. The birth of the smaller states of Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram followed one after the other from the womb of the mother state, Assam, even as the Bengalis agitated and secured recognition of Bengali as one of the official languages in the Barak valley (1961).

Imaginary or real discrimination against various tribes and communities in the matter of their economic, political and social well-being has been a cause of growing discontent and the consequent unrest in the North East. For example, the neglect of Mizo Hills by Assam Government at the time of their distress during the deadly famine in the late 1960s created the ground for Mizo insurgency. The only road to Mizo Hills was from Silchar in the Barak valley and it was in a very poor state. The pleas of the then pro-government Mizo Union (a local political party) for urgent help when the people in the interior areas of the district were dying of starvation did not evoke appropriate response from the then government of the state. Whatever help came was too little, too late. This state of affairs made the job of MNF leader Laldenga much easier. The strategic position of the Mizoram enabled Laldenga to get in touch with and comfortably secure military assistance from Pakistan and China for his enterprise. What is more, when the military situation became desperate, the central government fell into a quandary. Thus the IAF was for the first time (and till now the only time) used against a set of rebels in India and that happened in Mizoram. It was not a correct decision, whatever may have been the circumstances. It left a wound.

The movement against 'foreigners' in Assam (1979-85) did not eventually achieve much. There were a lot of contradictions in it even when it raged through. It created in the whole of the Brahmaputra valley a turmoil that physically lasted for six years but its impact has been much more far-reaching. The Assamese identity that had got built up over centuries of historical processes received a jolt with many of the tribal folks in it developing a sense of independent entity of their own in the wake of the movement. It happened because a lot of politics got played in the system. Thus the Bodos, the Rabhas, the Koch-Rajbangshis, the Tiwas, the Mishings, the Karbis, the Mottocks, the Morans, the Chutiyas, the tea tribes and other smaller communities started thinking in terms of a separate existence or autonomy.

A good number of the people of East Bengal origin who by themselves constitute a major community in the state had adopted Assamese as their mother tongue since the early 1950s but following the anti-foreigner movement, they have, to some extent, got alienated from the mainstream. Thus, analytically, the above movement can be said to have divided the polity in Assam to a large extent and created some distrust among various groups. Many of the ethnic communities who had joined the anti-foreigner movement with full force have since drifted away from the mainstream polity in Assam. A schism is visible as between the major communities in the Brahmaputra valley on the basis of ethnicity, language and religion. This does not forebode well.

The birth and growth of separatist movements on ethnic lines, like those by NSCN, ULFA and NDFB, in all their avatars, had created a realm of fear in the North East. These outfits were aided by their smaller versions in all the states of the region. Though the intensity of the conflicts in the states of the North East has, of late, waned, they nevertheless persist to a considerable extent. Every now and then, we keep hearing of kidnappings, shoot-outs, killings, extortion drives and the like by the cadres of the very outfits with whom the central and the state governments had entered into peace talks. Many are arrested.

PEACE PROCESSES

Almost all the conflicts in the North East had interventions by well-meaning mediators from time to time. The mediators, or interlocutors as they are known these days, are supposed to have confidence of the rebels and the governments at both the centre and the state concerned. Time to time they are appointed, they do a lot of talking spread over years but an eventual solution of the issues raised remains unaccomplished. Even at present, two retired bureaucrats at a very senior level have been 'mediating' between the major outfits of Nagaland and Assam on one side and the central government on the other. They have been on the job for quite some time but there does not seem to be any concrete result till now. The problem is that the Union of India cannot afford to upset the constitutional structure of the country in the line of what the rebel outfits seek to have.

Experience shows that a truce that is achieved through separate 'talks' with the individual militant groups never leads to a permanent peace settlement. Arms retained by the militants under a truce are used by them to intimidate people and extort money and even commit heinous crimes. The so-called surrenderees rather get a license to carry on with their unlawful activities under a cover of legitimacy.

A significant characteristic of the peace processes is that there rises almost invariably a group or a sub-group among the participants of an on-going peace process, which rejects the 'peace offers' or the terms negotiated. This leads to a stalemate and, at times, even more violence. The activities of the ULFA (I) and the NDFB (Songbijit) in the recent past bear the truth of the

premise. The proto-type has many examples - the history of undivided NSCN, NDFB, ULFA, DHD, UPDS, ANVC, HNLC, NLFT, PULF, PLA, etc. are illustrative of the nature of things that happen unfailingly. All the above outfits and many other small ones in the trade have had many factions competing in the same space. Often it turns into fratricide as it happened in the past among the Naga and Bodo militant groups. In Manipur, there are nearly 50 nos. of insurgent outfits, several ones having taken birth in quick succession out of each of the dozen or so mother outfits, like PLA, KCP, PULF, KYKC, etc. Thus 'peace talks' as being conducted lead the polity nowhere. They perpetuate the cycle of old outfits giving birth to new ones. The NSCN was born because the Shillong Accord of 1975 negotiated by Governor LP Singh had failed. Over the years, the NSCN has proliferated into several separate outfits - NSCN (IM), NSCN (K) and NSCN (K-K) - opposed to and fighting with one another. They have come to wield almost parallel power over the citizens in the spheres of their influence. In Dimapur, for example, the NSCN (I-M) rules the roost.

The fundamental question is - on whose authority do the rebel groups seek fulfillment of their demands for separation, autonomy, creation of new territorial entity, etc? Don't the common citizens have a say in the matter of how their political and economic life would be determined and whether they at all want the changes sought by the rebels concerned? Interlocutors get into secret parleys with self-styled armed groups where the fate of the ordinary citizens of given areas is largely negotiated. Is it fair?

It is felt that there should be transparency in the matter of such negotiations, if at all the government wants to negotiate 'peace'. Secret parleys do not achieve lasting results for peace. It leaves many dissatisfied. See the examples of Bodo and non-Bodo people in the BTC area. Thus interlocutors should share with the people through the media or otherwise the progress of talks they have with the parties concerned. Public opinion is certainly a most valuable input in resolving opposing view-points.

The concept of rule of law - the foundation of a democratic system - is invariably a casualty in conflict situations. The formula of peace process that is followed in most cases puts the last nail in its coffin. Such a circumstance makes conflict attractive for the young generation. Persons committing heinous crimes are allowed to sit and negotiate 'terms of peace' and fulfillment of 'demands'. They are allowed to retain ill-gotten wealth that they had acquired through their violent activities. They are unnecessarily allowed to internationalize their labels and related activities. While peace initiative should always be welcome within the parameters of law, people indulging in heinous crimes against the society should not get away with them in the name of peace. In my opinion, the process need be redefined and made democratic by keeping a provision for a survey of public opinion on the points of proposed action for resolution of a conflict in a given area. At the same time, offenders must face the consequences of their sins.

RESTORATION OF NORMALCY: A ROAD MAP

'Insurgency' has been a way of life for the north-easterners for nearly six decades now. All the states herein are affected by militancy of various hues and degrees. Militants have even acquired some degree of 'respectability' over the years though everyone knows what they do and how. Their strength increases when topmost government functionaries vie with one another to shake hands with so-called surrenderees at 'surrender ceremonies'. Seeing the 'soft state syndrome' prevalent in the region, the Maoists have now joined the fray, especially in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. Over-ground Maoist elements have already been cultivating the ground with gusto and soon we may see yet another 'peace process' with them. Right now, they are out to consolidate themselves in economically backward areas of Assam and stockpile arms for raising a revolt by peasants and unemployed ex-tea garden workers. They are very likely to collect arms through the small-scale traffickers of arms in Manipur, Nagaland, etc as well as by attacks on security forces and the police unless appropriate measures are taken to control the situation. Right now it appears to be their policy to take up local issues, agitate and popularize themselves. The Maoist extremists are indeed in an expansion mode over the wide space available in the region, especially in the plains.

The key to the restoration of peace and normalcy in the North East lies in physically choking up the trafficking routes for arms and ammunition - the physical tools of insurgency. It is the ready availability of guns that sustains insurgency. The militants will be forced to give up their vocation once availability of guns is controlled. It is no secret that supplies of weapons come to the region primarily from Yunnan province of China, besides Myanmar, Bangladesh, Nepal and other countries of Southeast Asia. The other day, Meghalaya chief minister Mukul Sangma stated that the GNLA was procuring weapons from Bangladesh both for itself and the ULFA in Assam. Earlier reports had said that the ULFA had commissioned the GNLA to keep the gun-running routes from Bangladesh (to the Brahmaputra valley via the Garo Hills) secured for them.

The gun-running routes across the Stilwell Road axis (Arunachal Pradesh), Tamu-Morey (Manipur), Kaladan valley (Mizoram), Champai (Mizoram), Garo Hills (Meghalaya), Barak valley (Assam), Feni river (Tripura), etc. are all known to our intelligence agencies and through them, to the central and state governments concerned. An examination of the arms seized and traffickers arrested by the security forces (SFs) gives out the sources of the supplies. Why can't the SFs seal up the routes? The need of the hour is intensive air and over-ground surveillance of the arms trafficking routes, identification of the big players in the game, interception of the supplies on the ground and neutralization of the traffickers. The interception and seizure by Bangladesh police of truck-loads of arms allegedly meant for the ULFA at Chittagong port in April, 2004 showed us vividly the NE militants' organized network for import of arms. This need be dealt with.

Some NE rebel groups have gradually been assuming the role of regional arms merchants and it is not difficult to imagine that they are in the business with an ambition to become global players in the field – a la Dawood Ibrahim. Reports say they have already been exploring the Mekong river route for the purpose even as the Irrawaddy river basin in the upper region of Myanmar has largely been their domain long since. The NE groups involved in the area are mainly the NSCN (IM), the NSCN (K), the NSCN (K-K) of Nagaland, the ULFA of Assam, the PLA, the KYKC, the PULF, the KCP, etc. of Manipur. It is important to note that ULFA (I) leader, Paresh Barua, has been reportedly concentrating in Ruili and very frequently visiting Kunming and other places in Yunnan. He has obviously developed some business interests in this region even as his ‘war’ against the Indian state never came to fruition. The NE groups have tie-ups with various rebel outfits of northern Myanmar – namely, those of Sagaing Division, Kachin state, Shan state, Chin Hills, etc for supply of arms, training of guerrillas and providing hide-outs from the onslaughts of state forces.

The unwritten alliance among the Indian and the Myanmar rebel groups helps all of them to continue waging their ‘war’ against their respective governments indefinitely. They do these things certainly not for ‘liberation’ of their father-land or mother-land, because they know it well that the said proposition is not really achievable. In the name of this ‘liberation’ enterprise which is but a label, they, at the same time, extort huge sums of money from traders, industrialists, professionals, peasants and even government servants of their respective home states. Development funds of the respective Indian states get siphoned off to them to a large extent.

In addition, they facilitate production and trafficking of drugs both locally and across the international border. As a matter of fact, the north-eastern states of India have turned into a corridor for trafficking of drugs from the Golden Triangle – an un-administered area on the borders of Myanmar, Thailand and Laos known for production and manufacture of heroin and various other drugs of abuse, particularly Methamphetamine tablets (also called Yuba). Consequent on the regular smuggling of drugs (from Myanmar) by routes passing through the porous eastern borders, the entire Manipur valley, Dimapur and a good part of Mizoram have become largely a drug-addict’s haven. Here there is no option other than physical intervention to make it impossible for the militant outfits to carry on with the type of things they do.

Secondly, the state must decide to establish the rule of law in letter and spirit, and come down heavily on all crimes and violations of law. The North East has seen during the last half a century an enormous amount of blood-letting. The collateral damage to those who survived the mayhems has been formidable. Families were reduced to destitution. In the 1950s and ‘60s, the Naga militants used to attack running trains, either derailing them by removing fishplates or causing blasts on the tracks, causing heavy casualties of innocent passengers, especially in upper Assam. Civil and military vehicles

were ambushed almost regularly causing similar deaths in Nagaland and its adjoining areas in Assam. The killing spree of the ULFA in the Brahmaputra valley took countless lives since the early 1980s. Many of the incidents of attack were horrific. Similarly, the BLT, the Bodo Security Force and later the NDFB (before and after it split) followed the path shown by the Naga militants in the 1950s. 'Cease-fire' agreements made with these groups from time to time let off from legal process almost all who committed heinous offences involving lives and public and private properties. Serious cases against rebels were withdrawn from prosecution. This certainly emboldened many from other ethnic groups – like the Dimasas, the Karbis, the Kukis, the Hmars, the Rabhas, the Reangs (Brus), the Tripuri tribes, the Khasis, the Garos, etc. – to become rebels and indulge in wrongful activities.

Those who commit crimes or profit from crimes must pay the penalty laid down in the law of the land. Victims of crime must receive justice. Here the need is for strengthening the police and other investigating agencies to efficiently investigate crimes and bring the offender to face trial in the court of law. However, things on the ground are different. First, the police in all the states in the region remain clue-less to most of the terrorist crimes.

Persons are kidnapped, held in detention for ransom, killed for not being able to pay fantastic sums of money or killed for 'being a spy of the police'. Massacre of migrant workers is a favourite pastime of Manipur militants. Even in Assam, killing of such people, like brick kiln workers from Bihar, took place several times. It has never been heard that the perpetrators of such acts were identified, brought to trial and convicted. To keep up a show, the police make some arrests but hardly succeed in adducing enough evidence for conviction. And, unfortunately, where they succeed, the state's 'amnesty' comes to facilitate 'peace talks'. The people at large get exasperated when they see the perpetrators get away.

The reasons for police failures are many. Their training remains inadequate for the challenging job of handling insurgency-related crimes. They lack in equipments, scientific gadgets and manpower. Here the emphasis should be on the expansion of the civil police in the junior ranks – persons who do the real work of investigation. So far, as has been our experience, there has been a tendency to expand the armed police by raising battalion after battalion to deal with insurgencies. This is not helpful. In order to establish rule of law, the police should acquire skill in solving cases in a scientific manner. This needs a heavy investment by the states in police recruitment, training, housing, etc. With the growth of new techniques in narco-terrorism, arms-smuggling and even human trafficking, a newer vista should be opened up to meet the growing challenges of insurgency.

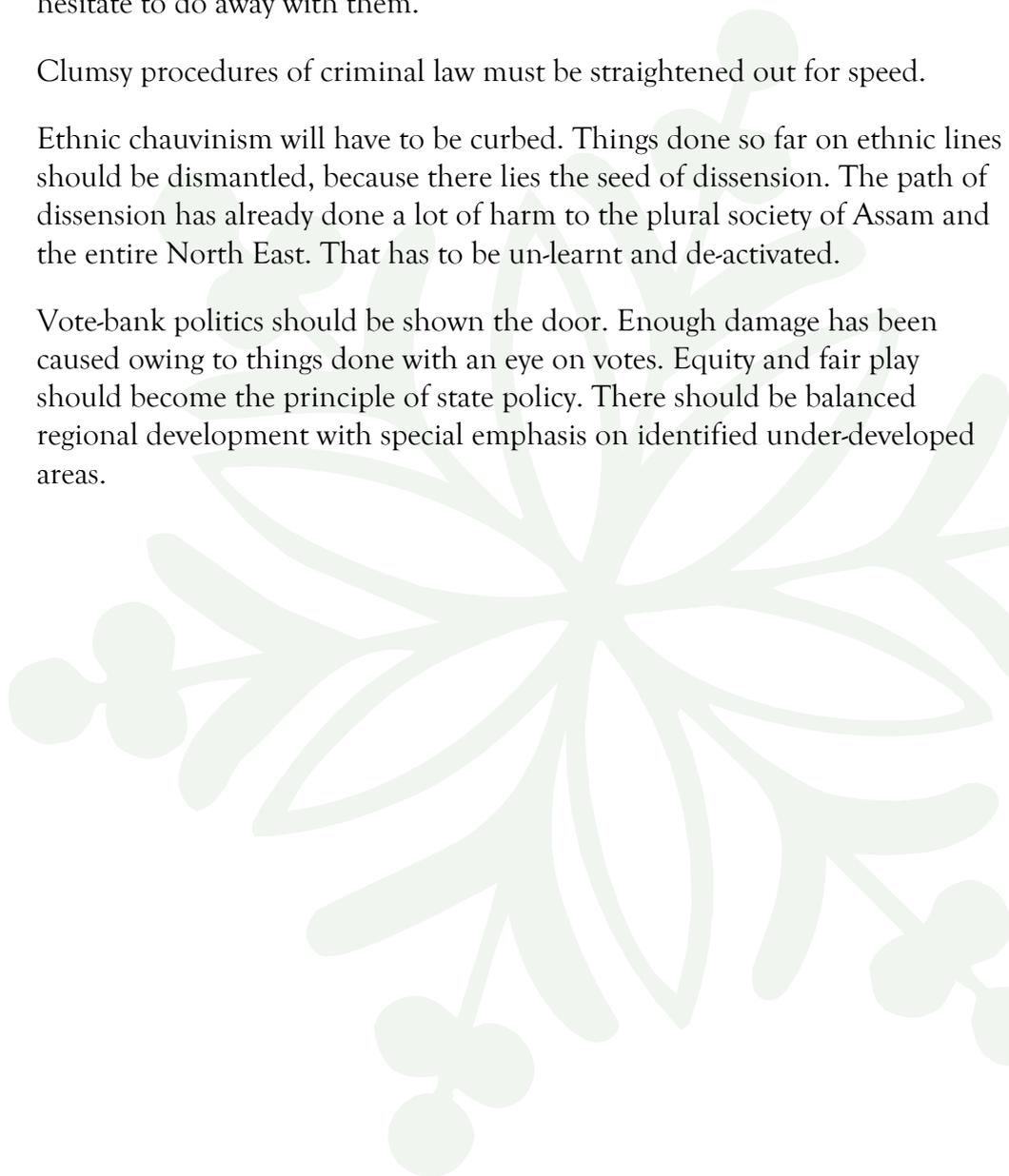
However, the police alone cannot deliver. The judiciary must also be strengthened. Right now, the lower judiciary which is really the institution to deliver justice at the grass-root level is in a bad shape. First, an enough number of judicial magistrates and judges are not available. The load of the number of under-trial cases is far too much for the existing strength of

judicial magistrates and judges to bear. As a result, trial of cases, however heinous, takes any length of time. The remedy is to increase the number of courts with all the facilities required for them to function with dignity and authority. The talk of having 'fast track courts' remains empty as long as enough number of judges are not appointed. Second, the courts do not get enough funds to pay daily allowances for state witnesses, who therefore avoid appearing in the court to give testimony. No wonder, cases fail for lack of appearance of the prosecution witnesses. Third, despite all the talk about protection of witnesses from the offenders, the country has not been able to lay down a definite policy on the subject. Thus few would venture to give testimony against insurgents when they know that the latter would not hesitate to do away with them.

Clumsy procedures of criminal law must be straightened out for speed.

Ethnic chauvinism will have to be curbed. Things done so far on ethnic lines should be dismantled, because there lies the seed of dissension. The path of dissension has already done a lot of harm to the plural society of Assam and the entire North East. That has to be un-learnt and de-activated.

Vote-bank politics should be shown the door. Enough damage has been caused owing to things done with an eye on votes. Equity and fair play should become the principle of state policy. There should be balanced regional development with special emphasis on identified under-developed areas.





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