

Governance and Development in Northeast India: Evolving Challenges in Mizoram

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Abstract

This paper is aimed at understanding the dynamics of state, government and civil society that keep public policies operational as part of the governance process in the NEI. Besides discussing a few responses of the state and its governmental agencies, the part that these non-state actors had played in the process of governance has been examined. In the NEI, the socio-political implications that entailed the process of governance deserve thoughtful attention. Also, an attempt is made to elucidate certain conceptual issues that had important bearing on the contextual notions of socio-political dynamics in the NEI. The paper is largely a theoretical exercise that was based on published works on the subject. As part of reading a few concepts that were defined in a general perspective, the paper endeavors to contextualize these issues in the NEI locale. Besides, certain empirical initiatives that were attempted by both the state and civil society agencies in the state of Mizoram have also been analyzed. Understandably, the study explores a few developmental challenges that emerged during the course of governance process in the state in recent years. And thus, the paper is set as a case study of Mizoram keeping in view of such changing contours in the socio-ethnic and political developments that prevailed in the region.

Key Words: Governance, Developmental Challenges, Northeast Indian Setting, Mizoram Experience

Anywhere, the state and governments seem to be prime motivators in facilitating the processes of governance and development. While the role of the state is largely determined by its structural and functional evolution, various governmental agencies actually execute the public policies. Now, its role has been questioned due to fiasco of governments in promoting development in different areas. For, the traditional approach to state and governance has been based on the premise that the government was solely responsible for formulating and effecting certain public policies in India. For long, the governmental institutions have been entrusted with the task of governing and managing public affairs. While governance becomes crucial in ensuring sustainable development,

developing deeper understanding of state and government settles governance process in any regional settings including that of the Northeast India (NEI).

State in the British India acquired an ambiguous position on the relationship between state and society. Thus, its response was found to be oscillating between a stance of non-interference in the societal affairs of an unfamiliar society and a converse one of active reformism. Yet, it hardly intervened overtly in the communal, casteist and tribal-ethnic structures. However, the post-Independent state did not maintain such an attitude of indifference. It had always tried to ensure integration and assimilation of the excluded societies with its mainstream. It was committed to social reform as the Constitution introduced large programs of social engineering and entrusted these to the state as their principal agency. Thus, the state undertook several legislations in favor of positive discrimination for the benefit of marginalized communities in the educational and employment sectors and thereby it became a highly interventionist state¹ in India (Kohli, 1997).

Meanwhile, in the wake of globalization process, state and its governmental agencies got weakened in terms of their operational roles in several developing countries including India. Thus, the state had become an unaccountable and ineffective political institution in discharging developmental activities. For, India inherited a legacy of

an overdeveloped bureaucratic state hierarchy that reflected in certain governmental institutions like the bureaucracy, the judiciary, the military and the police. Since there has been excessive dependence on the bureaucratic procedures and official hierarchy, citizens had become passive beneficiaries of governmental services. In consequence, the very nature and course of governance and development has been transformed, more so in the NEI that witnessed a few developmental challenges in recent times.

Incidentally, some of these challenges stem from the ethnic disputes, religious apprehensions, regional political systems and communitarian values that swayed the governance process in the region, which remained discreet when globalization process affected it invariably. Yet, state regimes, political parties and civil society organizations (CSOs) hardly gauged the popular expectations and thus failed to interpolate them accordingly during the course of governance process. This process has been obtainable to capture the socio-political changes that were discernible at different levels in the NEI. And, the character of non-state actors like the church, communities and the CSOs as well as the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) during this process was crucial. Following the formation of regional states, some of the NEI societies like the Mizoram have witnessed social harmony and political peace being restored considerably. Yet, crucial issues of governance and economic development still remain unaddressed.

Main Objectives: This paper is mostly aimed at understanding the dynamics of state, government and civil society that keep public policies operational as part of the governance process in the NEI. Besides discussing a few responses of the state and its governmental agencies, the part that these non-state actors had played in the process of governance has been examined. Contrary to the role of that the CSOs/NGOs had played in the mainstream India, their involvement in the NEI is noteworthy. Here, the socio-political implications that entailed the process of governance deserve thoughtful attention. Also, suffice it to elucidate certain conceptual issues that had significant bearing on the contextual notions of socio-political dynamics in the NEI.

Methodology

The paper is largely a theoretical exercise that was based on published works by a couple of authors on the subject. Besides, a few research studies that were conducted in the Mizoram University have also been accessed to during the course of its preparation. As part of reading a few concepts that were defined in a general perspective, the paper endeavors to contextualize these issues in the NEI locale. Besides, certain empirical initiatives that were attempted by both the state and civil society in the state of Mizoram have also been scrutinized. Obviously, the study explores certain developmental challenges that emerged during the course of governance process in the state in recent years. Thus, the paper

is set as a case study of Mizoram keeping in view of such changing contours in the socio-ethnic and political developments that prevailed in the region.

Conceptual Understanding

State and Government

With increased social mobilization and political contestation, there surfaced a 'consociational state' (Lijphart, 1989)² that had undermined a stable polity as it was faced with the problem of governance crisis. Besides, the developmental state has failed to condense glaring economic and social inequalities and also to check inter-community conflicts in different parts of the country. AtulKohli³ opined that, 'a democratic developing country is well-governed if its government can simultaneously sustain legitimacy, promote socio-economic development and maintain order without coercion. The growing incapacity in India to perform these tasks is what has been conceptualized as a manifestation of a crisis of governability'. Thus, there persisted a feeling that over the last few decades, India's institutional capacity to deal with conflict and initiate solutions has almost declined.

Meanwhile, commenting on the changing role of government, Kettl observed a different notion. According to Kettl (2001)⁴, 'government refers to the structure and function of public institutions. Governance is the way government gets its job done. Traditionally, government itself managed

most service delivery. Towards the end of 20th century, however, government relied increasingly on non-governmental partners to do its work, through processes that relied less on authority for control'. In other words, the existent notion implies greater participation by citizens in the governmental affairs so as to enhance the quality and effectiveness of policy-making. Clearly, there is an increasing appreciation that the state had assumed vast powers, and thus to check its misuse, efficiency needs to be brought into its governance structures and processes. In consequence, the role of private sector, market economy and civil society organizations has been associated with the notion of governance.

Viewed in this broad milieu, governance is generally understood as a government action that was beyond the scope of maintaining law and order in the society. Besides policing, there are several other tasks with which the governments are engrossed in. Moreover, the role of market forces and CSOs/NGOs in the region and outside has been considered as vital part of the governance process. Also, governance is conceived as multi-dimensional process that seeks out participation of various stakeholders in the society. Thus, one can recognize why certain global agencies⁵ offered generous conditional loans/grants to the Third World countries like India in the last two decades or so. It is only after fulfilling the major condition of ensuring 'good governance' that their financial services were extended to these countries indeed!

Moreover, since motto of good governance being, 'maximum governance is possible with minimum government', agencies of globalization were spreading the classical liberal notion of 'state is a necessary evil' (Thomas Paine). Thus, for instance, the corporate media has assumed the duty of sponsoring privatization of public sector units whereby the 'minimal state' would surface on the political horizon. And, in lieu of governance, the new public management has been proposed to play the 'managerial role' so that the market race could be stimulated. When such economic institutions entered the realm of 'governance', socio-political and cultural obligations of the state were given a go-bye. In consequence, some critiqued that the state and governance hardly created any congenial environment for ensuring sustainable development in the Third World countries.

Governance Process

Although the concept of governance⁶ was traced in the times of French regimes in the 14th century, the term 'governance' has been used as an alternative concept, in lieu of 'public administration' for quite some time. Both these terms are interchangeably referred to comprehend a system of coordination and implementation of the policymaking so as to bring in tangible changes in the administrative actions. In the contemporary context, Hye⁷ defined this concept as, 'governance is institutionalization of rule of law including coercive measures required to

enforce laws and rules for protection of lives, and property and developmental activities of government for promotion of common welfare are the foundation and superstructure of government, while spontaneous activities of people acting out of their free will reinforce both when they are allowed to flourish’.

Besides, Roseau⁸ (1992) made a specific reference to certain non-governmental institutions in the process of governance. He observed that ‘governance is a more encompassing phenomenon than government. It embraces governmental institutions, but it also subsumes informal, non-governmental mechanisms whereby those persons and organizations within its purview move ahead, satisfy their needs and fulfill their wants. Governance is thus a system of rules that is as dependent on inter-subjective meanings as on formally sanctioned constitution and Charter, and it is possible to conceive of governance without government of regulatory mechanisms in a sphere of activity, which function effectively even though they are not endowed with formal authority’. Meanwhile, concept of governance assumed significance since early 1990s when the concept had been considered decisive to creating an environment that fostered sustainable development. Since governance is associated with efficient and effective administration it became an essential component in promoting sustainable development of a state. And, the process of governance involves certain non-state actors like the market forces and

civil society in managing the socio-economic and developmental affairs at different levels. Thus, governance per se is not about a few government organs or their functions, rather it is concerned about the quality of their functioning as well.

Developmental Dimensions: In recent times, the process of governance has gained a transformative outlook due to the changing notion of ‘development’ or ‘sustainable development’. Acquiring a comprehensive connotation, the concept of sustainable development is not just about growth in Gross National Product (GNP) or increase in national income, per capita or otherwise, as was the notion earlier. It is no longer determined by economic growth, but enabling development in all spheres of human life, political, social, environmental and cultural. In 1990, the first Human Development Report⁹ (HDR) included three distinct components viz., longevity, education and income per head as indicators of Human Development Index (HDI). Thus, sustainable development is looked upon as a process of creating a suitable environment for people to lead the long, healthy and resourceful life. Alternatively, development is about expanding the choices people have in order to lead better human lives.

In expediting the sustainable development, the governance process needs to be effective and efficient. This notion leads one to reflect on the crucial aspect of governance that could be possible with maximum governance,

which ensures good governance in the long run. While governance deals with the collaborative partnership among different stakeholders, which is essential for policy formulation and implementation, good governance attempts to make these activities not just efficient but also more accountable and open to the public needs. Through various measures of good governance, an all-encompassing relationship between the government and the governed has been established in the Indian context. Evolving a citizen-centric administration through citizen charters, right to information and decentralization of powers and functions through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts are a few cases in point.

State and Civil Society in NEI

Apparently, Indian society is a multi-cultural entity, and thus different dimensions of governance attract one's attention. As against the traditional approach of Constitutional institutions that largely impacted the operational dynamics of governance, whole range of social institutions and political processes seemed to be playing key role in affecting the discourses of governance and development at different levels. Particularly, governance at the state level had become multidimensional as range of players, both state and non-state, were actively engaged in the process. Since its multiple implications impact the nature of public policies, study of political and developmental processes is very significant. Thus the prevalent governance

processes enable one to understand various developmental challenges in the NEI.

Distinctive Locale: Despite being a hilly-terrain, the Northeast India is a reservoir of rich natural resources and a striking join up of diverse peoples and cultures. This region is also the most human resourceful region with rising literacy levels in states like Mizoram. Unlike the mainstream India, the region has an added demographic advantage, due to low density, in the sense that it occupies 7.8% of the country's total land space but has a population of 3.8 crore, which makes it nearly 3.73% of the national population. This is also an unexploited and emerging market, which could be of interest to large domestic and international investors¹⁰. An interesting manifestation of the political process in this ethnic-dominated region is its division into seven political and administrative states, widely described as 'seven sisters'¹¹. There are differences and differentiations on the basis of ethnicity, race, religion, language/dialect, and geographical features from 'within' and 'without' the region. Regardless of these variances most of these states have fostered a sense of unity against some policies charted by the central government at times.

By the way, each ethnic community seems to have its world-view and have tried to be free from the other communities. Sometimes, the local communities urged for political autonomy (within or outside the constitutional

framework), which led to formation of numerous insurgent groups and thereby witnessed insurgency and counter insurgency¹². In response, the state agencies had resorted to certain coercive means. In consequence, the local communities suffered major hardships for decades on end. The people inhabiting in different regional settings had constantly entertained certain unalienable historical, socio-ethnic, cultural and geographical identities. Evidently, there has been rapid growth of ethnic-based pressure groups and political parties in this region, which made the governance process very problematic as each group had advocated for the politicization of respective identities.

Northeast India has always been faced with multitude of problems in the context of peace, governance and development. Thoughtful efforts were made towards assimilation and integration by some Delhi regimes, yet the NEI communities remained excluded from the mainstream India. The marginalized people were deprived of rights to democratic governance and economic development. In consequence, an unequal advancement in socio-economic transformation and thus feeling of insecurity and under development is evident today. Understandably, there prevailed a grave dissatisfaction due to the stagnating socio-economic conditions among their educated sections. Obviously, emerging developmental consciousness among the local communities has upset the political process. Thus, the region

witnessed an upswing in agitations and movements along political lines.

Ethno-political concerns: Initially, some pressure groups were set up as a voice of the ethnic communities and tribes to protest against the discrimination and exploitation of customary Chiefs¹³ or their colonial masters in the region. Subsequently, these groups were transformed into regional parties in different states. While some of them were established prior to Indian Independence, the some others were formed thereafter. These parties had strong ethnic roots that became potential alternatives to the national parties like the Indian National Congress. In any case, rise of regional parties is a country-wide phenomenon that had gradually undermined the importance of national parties over the years.

In fact, there was a need for the articulation of their respective ethnic and communitarian aspirations. Over the years, their strong desire for political autonomy and self-regulating existence had led to the development of regional parties. It is believed that since the national parties had miscarried the local needs and aspirations of different ethnic communities, regional political parties had been favored desperately. Thus, ethnic dimension has been the most important component of political process in NEI, as almost all regional parties and groups stand for preservation of their ethnic identities. Consequently, the regional political process since got mixed up with socio-ethnic considerations, altered view

of state politics has been discoursed. Contrary to common governance forms in the mainstream India, there exists a relatively distinct pattern in the NEI. The phenomena of ethnic, communitarian and regional specificities have far reaching implications on the governmental and developmental processes in the region.

In contrast to certain misconceptions that the regional parties in the NEI were 'parochial and secessionist', these parties became reasonably practical towards the issues of national standing. And thus, these parties were credited with a fact that they 'provided political stability, efficient government and continuity', as was argued by L S Gassah¹⁴. Further he observed that, 'whatever may be their initial attitudes to win elections, it is wrong to say that they offended national sentiment'. In other words, these regional parties played a responsible role in guarding both the local and national concerns and thereby emerged durable over the years in most of these states.

Yet, bad governance has been a major problem in the NEI states. Besides, the region is caught in a vicious cycle of economic backwardness, militancy and the resultant violence further retarded economic growth. Thus, it is likely to find the regional people entertaining a sense of alienation from the mainstream India and also feeling deserted. The local groups expected to be treated with tolerance and of course involved in the implementation of Look East Policy (LEP), for instance. Accordingly, special provisions for self-

governance and local autonomy for the people of NEI have been provided and continued, such as the Sixth Schedule, NEC and DONEAR. These are some measures, as part of the supposed 'Delhi Dialogue', which aimed at setting the regional-national partnership that could be fortified in the years ahead.

Besides, religious organizations like the multiple denominations of church and the CSOs/NGOs, which are quite influential in the NEI, have also undertaken certain developmental initiatives. To be more precise, the role of Christianity is very constructive and encouraging in this region, as these religious communities lead a more spiritual and communitarian life in the states like Mizoram and Nagaland. Fellow-feeling among them is spectacular and noteworthy. These communities have internalized certain social and moral values in themselves. Thus, community initiatives have always been useful in its inclusive development. Suffice it to study a case of Mizo society that was distressed on account of injustice done to it by dividing their homeland and declared 'excluded' area during the British rule¹⁵. And even after the independence, the exclusivist policy was followed by the Assam government during when the Mizos were subjected to socio-economic hardships. However, when the Mizo National Famine Front was formed to raise the demands of the Mizo society, concerned governments in Assam and outside failed to respond positively and there prevailed an atmosphere of volatility

in the Lushai Hills (district) that eventually became a Mizoram state in 1987.

Evolving Challenges in Mizoram

Communitarian Society: Like the other societies in the NEI, Mizoram¹⁶ has been marked by socio-ethnic, economic and geographical settings that are unusual and diverse, thus their implications are also of discrete nature. Their social relations are apparently communitarian. Despite being predominantly tribal-oriented ethnic groups and communities they are contented with their customary and social institutions. And, these communities were developed in such a way that their traditional and cultural values were precisely preserved. Thus, attempts at motivating the civil society groups to engage in such eventualities have been effective. Obviously, the civil society groups and variety of ethnic and tribal communities have been involved in the developmental strategies. Further, certain NGOs like those of the women, youth and student organizations in the region were involved in the developmental activities. This sort of social attachment brings about popular awareness on developmental initiatives in the state.

Civil Society Organizations: Another dimension of governance in Mizoram that always influenced electoral outcome seems to be that of the CSOs/NGOs and their social contributions in the political and electoral processes. Even though there are several CSOs/NGOs that assumed

initiatives of social and religious nature, the role of Young Mizo Association (YMA)¹⁷ has been decisive. Notwithstanding some non-Mizo communities that seemed to be reticent with the hegemony of YMA, bulk of the Mizos is on the rolls of this organization. Its active association with communities and people in the day to day affairs of socio-economic and political nature is quite significant. The organization has played a leading character in ensuring political socialization and thereby encouraged larger political participation in the state. This sort of role that the CSOs/NGOs had played in the governance process is an emerging challenge to the state and polity in Mizoram.

Political Process

Transformed itself into a political party under the leadership of Laldenga on October 22, 1961, the Mizo National Front (MNF) raised the demand of political freedom and independence for the Mizos, who were living in different parts of Indian subcontinent. In fact, the idea of independence of Mizos, who existed in the erstwhile Lusei Hills, Chittagong Hills, Tripura, Cachar district of Assam, Manipur and Chin Hills of Myanmar was conceived long before the Indian Independence¹⁸. Along with the objective of safeguarding the Christian religion that enrolled about 87% of total population, the MNF promised to uplift and develop the Mizos in all respects once it attained independence. Largely involved in the

socio-cultural and communitarian activities that characterized the ethnic and religious interests of the major tribes in the state, the MNF mobilized the Mizo community at the political level.

Electoral Experience

Mizo society has been incredible in achieving peaceful elections. The state witnessed the largest poll percentage of over 82% in elections at different levels in the country. Thanks to the role of Mizoram People's Forum (MPF), as a voluntary watchdog, the Presbyterian-oriented Civil Society Organization that implemented numerous electoral reforms even in the remote parts of state in the 2008 elections and after. Since the political parties are under the religious obligation of fulfilling the Election Commission's norms and regulations, role played by the MPF became expedient in the elections. Due to its dynamic role, political parties felt contented in conducting joint electoral campaigns that were more peaceful and less costly. Moreover, both the ruling and opposition parties were drawing the vocal support of religious groups and leaders, yet, the various Church denominations¹⁹ maintained dispassionate position in the 2013 elections. Perhaps, this sort of statewide campaign was not effective elsewhere in the country, and thus the MPF could be considered as a positive challenge in the state.

Populist Policies

Of late, the governance process has been so transformed that the populist

public policies seemed to have undermined the ethnic and religious considerations to some extent in Mizoram. As in several others states in the mainstream India, the Mizoram too witnessed some populist trends in the context of socio-economic development. For instance, at one level, the politics of populist policies has been noticed in the recent polls (2013). Despite religious appeals that pointedly evoked the state electorate, the ruling Congress has benefitted in recent Assembly elections on account of its flagship scheme of the New Land Use Policy (NLUP)²⁰. Promised in the wake of 2008 elections, the NLUP got financed by the Congress-led UPA Union government quite liberally. Notwithstanding disapproval of its prejudiced implementation, the scheme had given a crucial advantage to the ruling party in the last Assembly elections, as was claimed by the state Chief Minister soon after the election results were announced²¹. In other words, the politics of development that was how the critics described, has also posed a major developmental challenge to the very process of governance in the state.

Conclusion

To conclude, the Northeastern states have got specific makeup socially and culturally. Although, the NEI communities are economically backward, culturally and spiritually these are ahead of others in the country. More specifically, ethnic concerns along with their tribal and communitarian outlooks were raised as

part of identity movements for separate statehood as well as for more political autonomy in some of these states in the region. Since the NEI is rich in several respects that could be developed accordingly, governance process became crucial in undertaking any sort of developmental strategy. Interestingly, the mainstream Indian vocabulary of national integration, assimilation and security perceptions has been understood conspicuously in the context of localized perspective. Thus, ethnicity-related tribal, religious, communitarian and linguistic concerns of the NEI deserve primacy if social harmony and lasting peace is to be realized in the region.

Yet, the last two decades of globalization and governance offered ample opportunities (LEP, for instance) in the region at different levels so as to

undertake some developmental initiatives. Both these processes have had an impact of substantial nature on state and governance in the region. In the case of Mizoram that is largely illustrative of the NEI setting, implications of public policies of the national leadership or its very mindset towards these peripheral communities are far reaching as one could witness differing scenario in recent decades. While the emerging challenges in the context of governance and developmental processes have been marked by ethnic concerns, religious notions, regional apprehensions, their developmental implications are quite alarming. It is time the state realize the need of revisiting these perceptions and respond to these accordingly through popular, if not populist, public policies so that the governance process in the NEI is steered on effective lines.

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- ¹¹ The seven states include: Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. Following the merger, Sikkim has also been considered as eighth state in the NEI.
- ¹² According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), the number of insurgent outfits in NER is 109 in 2006. However, according to Home ministry estimate in 2011, there are 79 insurgent groups/splinter factions in the NER.
- ¹³ As part of the age-old Chieftain system that dominates the community life in the villages of Mizoram, the Chiefs as headmen and control the total land in the village areas. The Chiefs allot piece of land for the people for cultivation on a temporary basis.
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- ¹⁷The largest civil society organization in the state and well-connected to the people throughout the state.