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North-East India: Land, People and Economy

K. R. Dikshit and Jutta K. Dikshit

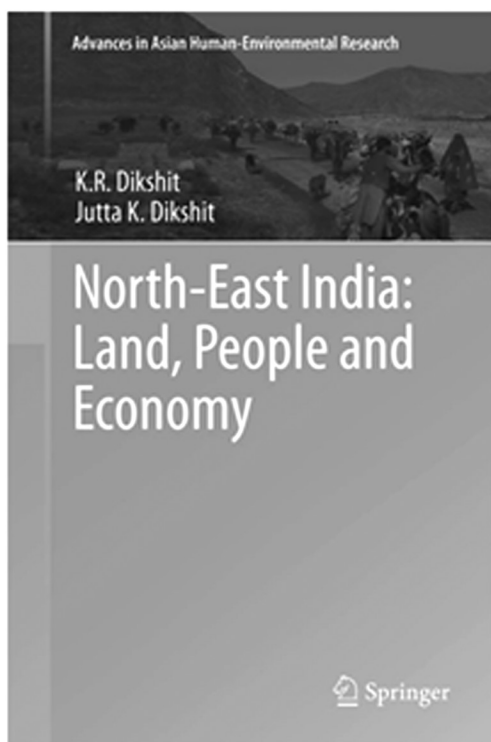
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The book by Prof. K R and Jutta Dikshit provides us a most scholarly written account of the North-East India. It is an outcome of painstaking work put in by authors for 6+ years. It is a voluminous work, running through 800 pages and properly supported

by sufficient number of relevant figures and plates. It also includes as many as 195 tables providing statistical data on various themes. The book is arranged in five parts and twenty chapters. It is an authentic account of the Land, People and Economy of the region. The authors, as they state, initially had planned for a text book for college students of Geography to help them in their research. However, finally it has turned out to be a thorough reference book on the region.

In first chapter on introduction authors acquaint readers with the organisation of the text. All the chapters barring introduction (Ch 1) and epilogue (Ch 20) are prefixed by a short abstract providing in brief introduction to the themes covered. Each chapter is suffixed with list of references, besides an all-encompassing bibliography at the end of the book that should prove an asset to any researcher who would try to get up to date information of the region.

Part I of the book is devoted to the Historical Outline of the region. It starts with a chapter entitled 'North-East India – Through the Ages'. The authors describe NE India as terra incognita till 6th century AD. There by indicating no or very little

dependable material is available to throw light on the history of the region prior to the 6th century. This chapter includes a brief history of the region, starting with a mention of Naraka-Bhagadatt episode in Mahabharata, to the reorganization of States of North-East India. The Naraka-Bhagdatta episode, authors consider may not be authentic, yet cannot be ignored altogether. The chapter describes the Kingdom of Kamarupa from western Brahmaputra valley, its extent, dominance of Indo-Aryan culture and emergence of Assam as political and socio-cultural entity during the ancient period. Authors acquaint the reader with medieval period during which the rule of Ahoms got established and lasted for 600 years (1228-1838) in the eastern Assam. The story of British intervention and subsequent annexation of different parts of the NE are described in the latter part of the chapter. This is followed by a discussion on reorganisation of states in post independent period. On the whole, through this chapter authors provide reader a picture how the North-East has arrived at the present status.

The part II includes the description of THE LAND. Besides chapters on structural setting, relief, drainage and climate, which any regional geography book will always include, special chapters like Natural Hazards, Resource Endowment, and Natural Vegetation are included in this part. Authors opine that the Natural Hazards are balancing act of nature and existed even before the humans arrived on the scene and they are labeled as hazards or disasters by us due to their adverse effect on humanity. The chapter on Natural Hazards includes discussion on wide spread threats of floods and earthquakes as major disasters of the region. This is followed by discussion on

landslides that are, though localized in their areal extent, quite frequent in some parts of the North-East. The chapter on Resource Endowment deals with the non human resource base of the region. Authors have discussed resources like land, water and minerals. Authors opine that relief condition of the region appears as a limiting factor in utilization of resources like land and water. Authors mention that the scope for an exclusively agriculture-based economic development is limited in this region. The mountains, with thin population, are sites for horticulture and tourism. The region has heavy rainfall and abundant surface flow, but there is no avenue for its utilization. The only important utilization is in the generation of hydroelectric power by harnessing relief energy in mountainous terrain. Among other natural resources mineral resources like petroleum and coal are discussed by authors at some length. Both these energy resources form the basis of industrial development in the region. However, there is not much discussion on Uranium mineral though only a passing reference is found in the abstract of this chapter.

For natural vegetation, the real wealth of the North-East region, authors have added a separate chapter. Barring Assam and Sikkim all other states in North-East have over 70 % of area under forest. The eastern Himalayan province of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Manipur is one of the two biodiversity hotspots in the country. Authors attribute the rich biodiversity conditions in the region to its location on the margin of the tropics and altitudinal zonation. Authors make mention of sacred groves, from states like Meghalaya and Manipur as well as Kabri-Anglong plateau of Assam that represent the traditional way of preserving biodiversity.

Authors have concluded this chapter with a short note on forest economy. At the end of the chapter one finds two appendices giving list of National parks and Wildlife sanctuaries in the region.

The second part of this work that includes six chapters is devoted to THE PEOPLE of North-East India. Three of six chapters are devoted to the characteristics of population, describing different aspects such as density and distribution, sex ratio, literacy etc. Most of the regional accounts normally include discussions on these aspects. Besides these, authors have included discussions on early colonization, people of the north-east and migration to the North-East. These chapters have made the section quite interesting. The first chapter of this section in a way describes the peopling of the region. Considering the Neolithic tools referred by different British administrators in the region, authors opine that human culture existed in the region during Neolithic at least for a millennia. Authors mention that proto-historic monuments in the form of megaliths are indicators of early human habitation and are found all over in the North-East region. Authors have identified the Ethnic groups and their areas of occupation on the basis of their linguistic roots. Authors consider Mongoloids, from Tibetan region and speaking Tibeto-Burman languages, to be the earliest immigrants of the region. Authors identify these Mongoloids as Bodos who initially settled mostly in the western Assam and subsequently spread in different parts of North-East. Indo-Aryans appear to be the next of colonisers, who probably arrived in the North-East region in 1000 BC. Coming from the east, Nagas are supposed to have arrived in first millennium AD. Nagas were followed by Ahoms, the rulers of the

Upper Assam region, who are considered to have arrived in 13 century AD. Lushai and Kukis, also came from the east they are considered to have colonized mostly in last 800 years. The Khasis speaking Austro-Asiatic group of languages and belonging to Mongoloid race are mostly confined to eastern Meghalaya. However, their period of arrival authors consider to be indeterminate. The sequence of arrival of early colonisers and the areas they occupied is well depicted in a self explanatory map accompanying the discussion.

The next chapter in this section entitled 'The People of North-East India' spreads over 134 pages and is the longest chapter in the book. It is in this chapter that authors introduce the reader to the socio-cultural characteristics of the people of North-East and their geographical distribution. Describing the some details of racial elements like Mongoloids – Indo-Aryans – Austric- and Dravidians authors comment on 'Tribal-Nontribal Dualism' amongst the people of North-East and correlate this dualism with the landscape duality of hills and plains. They bring out the fact that except for Assam and Tripura, the states occupying the plains, almost all other states of North-East have dominance of tribal population. The characteristics and distribution of major tribes, their linguistic and religious composition, as well as proportion of major tribes in each State have been depicted in a map and pie diagrams using district level data. Besides the tribal population one comes across the discussion on non-tribal population in each state. Barring Assam and Tripura the non-tribal people in the rest of the state form the minority group and they are primarily traders, labourers and service personnel and are mostly the

recent immigrants. Reader finds a section devoted for each State describing the ethnic composition, tribal people in the state, unique features of each of major tribes in the state, their social organisation, non-tribal people in the State, people and religion etc. This chapter is a real treat for reader. A list of all scheduled tribes in North-East stated to have been given in the appendix at the end of the chapter is however, not traceable.

Authors have devoted a separate chapter to the 'Migration and Its Impact on Society and the Economy of North-East'. This chapter basically deals with the migrations which have taken place in recent past – the last two centuries. Authors maintain that no other region of India has experienced such huge, continuous and prolonged immigration as North-East India. Taking a historical view of immigrations authors identify five stages of immigration mainly constituting 1) Bengali Officials, 2) Tea estate coolies, 3) Bengali peasants, 4) Refugees after partition and 5) Post partition illegal migration from erstwhile East Pakistan (before and after 1971 war). The details of each of these stages of immigration are described in following sections of the chapter. Of these the first, Bengali Officials, appears to be export of personnel by British Administration and the second, Tea estate coolies, is well planned import of labour force for a specific purpose by tea estate owners primarily the British. Rest three is the large scale movements of people from tributary area to the destination area. Authors have attributed these immigrations to the factors like population density gradient, temptation of secure livelihood, events like partition and liberation of Bangladesh, escape from persecution by security forces in East Pakistan and environmental causes.

Authors maintain that among the North-East States Assam and Tripura are to have faced the brunt of immigration the most. While discussing the consequences of illegal migration authors mention the loss of harmony in Assamese Society as the greatest impact of illegal immigration in Assam from Bangladesh.

The fourth part of the book is devoted to the discussions on THE ECONOMY of North-East. It is spread over four chapters such as Agriculture, Industries, Transport and Trade and Socio-Economic Development. The chapter on agriculture starts with a historical perspective on the land tenure and agricultural management in the region. Giving a brief outline on the traditional cropping pattern in the plains authors provide a detailed note on agriculture in the hilly areas. The shifting cultivation or 'slash and burn cultivation' or jhuming is the method adopted in entire hilly tract of the region. It is being carried for generations and still it is in continuance. Authors attribute its continuance even to the date to the non availability of suitable agricultural land and more to the conditions of poverty and unemployment. However, jhuming is not a gainful economic activity and is considered to be destructive to forests and biodiversity of a region. Authors mention that there has been considerable research in this kind of agricultural activity but the net result of the researches has been neither conclusive nor applied. They believe that the answer to shifting cultivation lies in promotion of horticulture. While discussing the present day agriculture of the North-East authors take up the issue of low level of area under cultivation and the problem of uncultivated land. Authors have particularly mentioned the cases of Manipur and Meghalaya

recording as high as 64 and 66 percent of land being not under cultivation. In latter part of the chapter authors have discussed the crops and cropping patterns. The crops are discussed under two sections such as food crops and plantation crops.

North-East India is by any standard not a developed region so far as the industries are concerned. A few industries that have flourished in the region are tea, petroleum based units, plywood, pulp and paper, cement etc. all of which process locally available raw materials. Authors have mentioned that the region has a strong core of cottage industry inclusive of silk yarn, cloth and forest based industries like furniture, bamboo products and domestic utility goods. Most important industrial state in the region is Assam with a few oil refineries. Meghalaya has some cement units processing local limestone. Authors have spelled out some factors responsible for the low level of industrialisation, most important of these being the absence of encouraging atmosphere reflected in insurgencies, threats of extortion, violence and overall attitude of hostility towards entrepreneurs and investors. The overall picture on this front is quite gloomy in the North-East as whole.

The last part of this monumental work includes a single chapter, a concluding one, entitled Epilogue. It is rather a loud thinking by the authors after observing the conditions in the North-East for almost a decade. It shows the concern of authors towards most pressing social issues of the region that need immediate attention and lasting solutions. Authors mention that each State in the region has at least one issue that is quite emotive. Issues like perceived threats to the ethnic and cultural identity, boundary disputes

between neighbouring states, problems of insurgency, illegal immigration etc. are quite serious and often lead to frequent conflicts and confrontations in the region. Authors have identified horticulture as a substitute for jhuming or shifting cultivation. They also make a mention of various successful experiments carried out in the region but due to lack of propagation and implementation in other parts of the region these have not yielded desired results. Giving examples of Kaziranga National Park and Hornbil festival of Nagaland authors identify Tourism as another activity for which each state has tremendous potentials. However, due to slow pace of infrastructural development particularly the transport network and also due to perception of the tourists about the safety in the region these potentials remain largely untapped.

The volume under review is a marvellous piece of regional account. I am sure this will be used by researchers of North-East region as a must reference for years to come. It should find a place in the libraries of not only all the Universities in the North-East but most of the Universities in the country that offer post graduation in geography. Only deterring factor of this volume is its price that is unaffordable for individual researchers. The reviewer hopes that soon we may get a paperback edition of book at affordable price.

S. R. Jog