

# Soft Power Potentials in North East India

**Aveivey D.**

*Research Fellow, ICI, New School*

---

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The paper focuses on the potentials of North East India becoming a powerful soft power region. It discusses on wide range of soft power that had already explored or unexplored in the region. The paper also identifies some of the limitations of the region that hinders in becoming a soft power.

For many, Northeast India is a homogenous region comprising of eight states. But the fact is that it is one of the most diverse part of the country. Ninety-eight percent of the region shared its border with Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh. Therefore, only two percent of its corridor called the chicken neck, is the only passage to the rest of India. The northeast remained secluded to a considerable extent from the rest of the country till the advent of the Britishers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The region is also considered as remote, having poor connectivity and isolated geographical location. The region, today, called as North East India (NEI) is a politico-administration by independent India (Chakrabarti 2008:92). There is no concrete concept of northeast as a region prior to 1960s, though many of them share a common race. It was 1962 war of India and China that brought the bench mark to turn the frontiers into border. It also led to the state building process where Nagaland got its first statehood in 1963. Thereafter, North Eastern Council (NEC) was established in 1972 through the Parliament Act, under NEC Act 1971. Having realised the strategic importance of the region, in 2001, the Ministry of Department of North Eastern Region (DONER) was set up as a separate ministry in the Central Government, following which Sikkim was inducted into the region and became the eight states of NEI.

In 1991, in order to outline foreign policy approach towards South East Asia, East Asia and Asia Pacific countries (regions with high economic prosperity) India's

Look East Policy (LEP) was introduced by the then Prime Minister of India, P. V. Narashimha Rao which was rechristened as Act East Policy (AEP) by the Government of India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014. India's AEP has yielded a rich dividend. Having said this, India-ASEAN (Association of South Asian Nations) trade has increased from about US\$ 10 billion in 2000 to US\$70 billion in 2011 (Das, *et. al* 2016:1), which has recorded significant growth in terms of trade. Besides economic engagements, the bilateral relationship with ASEAN, East Asian and Asia Pacific countries have been raised to strategic partnership level. Nevertheless, India's trade with those countries mainly flows through sea whereas land routes failed to attract the attention of the trading organisations inspite of geographical proximity. However, there is greater expectation in the near future, once India-ASEAN physical connectivity, projects like India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral Highway, which is expected to be extended to Laos and Cambodia and Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport (KMTT) will come to an end and the region will be poised to play a meaningful role in integrating India with SEA countries (*ibid* 2016:2). Apart from this, Stilwell Road which was built during World War II had initiated under (Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar) BCIM countries and Bay of Bengal Initiative for Muti-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) can play a greater role in connecting with the northeastern states. Besides geographical proximity, the northeastern states share close affinity in terms of culture, customs, dresses and food habits with the regions. Thus it is important to look at the potentials of soft power in the North East Region (NER) and identify the richness of its products where it can attract the rest of the country and other neighbouring countries.

## 2. WHAT IS SOFT POWER?

The term soft power was coined by Joseph Nye in the late 1980s. Soft Power can be defined as the ability to

get what you want through attraction or co-optation rather than coercion as a means of persuasion or the capacity to affect/influence the behaviour of other to get to the outcome one wants (Nye 2011, p. 20-21). I would like to put soft power in this way, soft power is the power that can create soft-corner in others through ones action or performance of something that is acceptable to others without use of force. Means to gain soft-corner may be honest or deceptive. Elements of soft power can be of cultural, political values and foreign policies. Joseph Nye coined the term in a book, *Bound to head: The changing nature of America Power*. Later the term had been used widely in international affairs by the researcher and analysts. Later his friend Robert Putnam expanded and developed further the soft power concept.

Hard power has been the traditional form of foreign policy tool, but in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, soft power has been emerging according to some scholars. Many scholars have studied soft power as a behavior influence outcome in the post September 11 period (Nye 2004, Schneider 2005, Arndt 2005, Chong 2005, Gray 2011). Soft power and hard power sources has also been divided about the effectiveness and usefulness of such capabilities. Some scholars argue that soft power is effective and it sometimes reinforces and sometimes interferes with hard power, but in any case, soft power does not depend on hard power (Nye 2004). Others feel that soft power would be more effective if more money was spent on it (Schneider 2005). Another line of literature feels that soft power is emerging and getting more influential in today's global information space and it has less hard power support (Chong 2005).

However, for some, soft power has given a confusion concept, where they believe soft power has American rule in cold war views saying where west was considered as prosperous and communist bloc associates with deprivation, lack of freedom etc. To that extend west exercise lots of soft power on those living in communist regimes, East Europe and in the Soviet Union. It has rooted in the complex image. Therefore, soft power also doesn't look like soft power when the image portrays differently. In reality, most of the nations have followed the idea of national interest in which often they face criticisms and that finds hard to build trust on each other country.

### **3. SOFT POWER: IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIA**

India is a place where people of different caste, religion, creed, race or features are living together and were been able to develop and maintain consistently the individual system that goes beyond centuries. That along is a source of soft power, how we lived in the past and how we live now and what are the constitutional ideal that enjoins us together.

By and large, some of the soft power of India that attracts to the other part of the world includes age-long religion like Buddhism, Gandhi's peace and non-violence, largest democracy, yoga, ayurveda, bollywood, cricket, food/cuisine, dresses, higher education, Swachh bharat Abhiyanetc. Sadly there is hardly anycontribution we could see from the NER.Hence it is important to identify the capability of soft power from the NER.

### **4. NORTH EAST INDIA AS A POTENTIAL FOR SOFT POWER**

The soft power will be much more lasting and powerful than the hard power of economic or military power in the context of the northeast India. The region is rich in horticulture products, plantation crops, rare herbs, vegetables and medicinal plants. It also offers unlimited tourism opportunities, rare species of flora and fauna, natural scenic beauty, performing arts, cuisine, services (hospitality) and handicrafts. Thus ASEAN, East Asian and Asia Pacific countries can explore opportunities to partner and exchange the rich culture and traditons as part of tourist festivals and bring closer ties through people to people contacts. They need to encourage their greater participation by exploring mechanism to facilitate exchanges in the areas of culture, sports, arts and education.

The northeast India is also a cultural hub in the country. This region not only gives its culture to others but assimilates any culture without much problem and difficulties. It is a place where all types of cultures thrives well. The northeast India is the region where latest lifestyles are almost instantly adapted, food habits etc is most upto date with every kind of culture particularly of the West and of Asian countries. There is vibrant spirit of acceptance of all cultures. For instance, Manipur is known as "Little Korea". The northeasterners are also great music lovers. Music is part and partial of their lives (Baruah).

The NEI is also a great place for cultivation of organic food. For instance, in January 2016 Sikkim became India's first 100 per cent organic state. Today, all farmings in Sikkim is carried out without the use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, providing access to safer food choices and making agriculture more environment friendly activity (Taneja 2017). There are many flora and wild tropical edible vegetables which has great health value. For instance, ginger and turmeric grown specifically from Manipur is a great demand from the European countries. (The Sangai Express, 2018). The hottest chilly namely Bhut Jolokia, also locally called Naga morcha, u-morok, tagin tero, malcha pom and seth yamdik is a widely demanded organic spice across the world. For instance, a kilo of Naga Chilli cost as high as Rs. 50,000 in Japan (Hingkung 2013) and one of the finest teas in the world such as Assam tea owing to strong geographical indication. There are umpteen numbers of organic food and flora including medicinal herbs which are not mentioned and yet to be explored. Therefore, export of such organic food can win the hearts of the consumers. Once they become loyal consumers of such food, it can contribute to a strong soft power.

North East India has a great potential even in tourism industry. This sector is very bright and promising because of its exotic and natural scenic beauty. Many of the beautiful places of NEI have not been exposed to the world. There are many unexplored scenic exotic places in the NEI which has huge potential to attract tourist and can attract film industry to come and shoot the movies. When those places are fully developed and opened up for tourists, there will be great inflow of tourists from across the country and the globe. This sector is all the more promising on account of availability of service oriented labour force from within the NEI besides the north easterners are known for dedication and loyalty. Hence, NEI can be one of the potential to become a tourist's hot spot region in the world.

On the other hand, there are certain situation which may be discouraging and causing difficulty for the growth of soft power in the region and it is important to handle with care and precaution. Some of the customary laws in force are binding them especially in terms of land ownership. Some of such laws are repressive in nature. A huge investment is also required in building upon soft power but it is depriving them to avail loans from the

financial institutions, though credit facility is the engine for any economy. The better the credit facility is, the faster the economic growth will be. Lack of credit facility is a great setback for development in northeast India. Limited connectivity & infrastructure, markets are not well developed, lack of people to people contact, lack of regional and global communication/media problem, corruption are some of the bottlenecks. Besides, we have undue bureaucratic and other influences in every sphere of life which is preventing fast and transparent execution. We are also unable to attract international students due to various institutional barriers. There is hardly any foreign investment or collaboration is also one of the limitations. Apart from the mentioned issues, the media portrays wrong message on the region and hardly there is any coverage.

### 5. CONCLUSION

Finally I would like to conclude with a few thoughts for reflection. The government should not drag or delay when promised for any development projects whereas ASEAN or East Asian or for that matter say Asia Pacific countries are very efficient in implementing once it is laid down on the paper. We must act confidently in our words and action by gaining trust in the global arena and we have to go beyond our traditional image which were portrayed negatively. Our attitude towards strangers is an important soft power building factor therefore we should do away with our xenophobic nature. It is important for other countries to venture into Indian market beyond New Delhi, Mumbai, Bangaluru, Hyderabad, Gurugram etc. which are yet to realise its potentials viz NEI.

In the age of fast changing world where every field is under continuous change, the world belongs to those who can move along with the dynamism of the change. So promoting the soft power is an important strategic measure in the age of globalisation.

### REFERENCE

- [1] Arndt, Richard T., (2005) "The First Resort of Kings: American Cultural Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century" paperback, Potomac Books, Inc. Washington DC, ISBN 1-57488-587-1.
- [2] Baruah, Joyshree (2017), "Clutch of eclectic music festivals in the Northeast attract attention despite lack of sponsors",
- [3] <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/clutch-of-eclectic-music-festivals-in-the-northeast->

- attract-attention-despite-lack-of-sponsors/articleshow/60808804.cms (retrieved on 7th March, 2018).
- [4] Chakrabarti, S.B (2008) "Student /Youth Movement with Special References to North-East India", in Ray, Ashok, Kumar and Satyabrata Charborty, *Society, Politics and Development in North East India*, New Delhi, Concept Publishing Company.
- [5] Chong, Alan. (2007) "Foreign Policy in Global Information Space. Actualizing Soft Power". Palgrave MacMillan.
- [6] Das, Gurudas and C. Joshua Thomas, (2016), (eds.), *Look East to Act East Policy: Implications for India's Northeast (2016)*, Routledge, Delhi.
- [7] Hingkung, John (2013), "Northeast's Red King Chili sold at INR 50K per kilo in Japan", <https://www.sevendairy.com/northeast-red-king-chili-sold-inr-50k-kilo-japan/>(retrieved on 7<sup>th</sup> March, 2018).
- [8] Nye, Jr., Joseph (2004), "Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics" New York Public Affairs.
- [9] Nye, Joseph Jr. (2011) "The Future of Power" Public Affairs, New York.
- [10] Schneider, Cynthia (2005). "Culture Communicates: US Diplomacy that Works," in Jan Melissen, Ed., 2005. *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations*, Palgrave Macmillan, pp.147-168.
- [11] Taneja, Sonam (2017), "Sikkim is 100% Organic", <http://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/organic-trial-57517> (retrieved on 5th March, 2018).
- [12] Tea Industry in India, <https://www.ibef.org/exports/indian-industry.aspx> (retrieved on 7th March, 2018).
- [13] The Sangai Express, <http://www.e-pao.net/GP.asp?src=1.13.030205.feb05> (retrieved on 5<sup>th</sup> March, 2018).