

Assam: A Potential Jewel in Northeast India



Comments 0



Dr Dilip Borthakur 25 January 2018 8524 views

Assam used to be a much larger [state](#) and was known by its ancient name, Kamrup. For administrative reasons and in order to cater to ethnic aspirations, it was gradually divided into five states which are Assam, [Arunachal](#), [Meghalaya](#), [Nagaland](#) and Mizoram. Along with two other states [Manipur](#) and [Tripura](#) the seven states are called seven sisters. The seven sisters along with Sikkim is called North [East India](#). The region is [India](#)'s gateway to Southeast Asia. If [India](#) was to develop a proper road network from its Northeast region into [Myanmar](#), in one single stroke, [New Delhi](#) will get connected with Singapore through a high-speed expressway.

[India](#) has long acknowledged that the Northeast region is its link to Southeast Asia. Government has also approved upgrading the road connectivity from Northeast to [Myanmar](#), which if implemented, will throw open floodgates of developments in the region. A pact to this effect has already been linked with [Myanmar](#) and now is the time to put words into action, so that there is holistic development of the region.

Since [India](#) got its independence from the British yoke, Assam has not attained the kind of prosperity it was traditionally known for. Ironically, during the British Raj, otherwise known for its brutal oppression in the rest of the country, there were a lot of development works undertaken in Assam, particularly the setting up of tea gardens and oil exploration. Assam Oil Company was a subsidiary of Britain's Burmah Oil Company.

Asia's first oil well was drilled in Digboi in 1890. The town Digboi got its name from the phrase associated with drillers being egged on to continue the hard work, 'dig, boy ! dig ! dig boy ! dig '. Asia's first oil refinery was set up in Digboi in the year 1901. Assam Oil Company, a subsidiary of Burmah oil company was registered in [UK](#) to develop the discovered oil field. At that time itself the Britishers built a railway line from Margharita to Dibrugarh to transport coal from Margherita (which is further [east](#) of Digboi) and oil and refinery products from Digboi.

Burmah Oil and central government of [India](#) subsequently formed a 50:50 joint venture by the name Oil [India](#) Ltd to explore and produce hydrocarbon from other potential areas in parts of upper Assam. Subsequently large parts of Assam valley was sanctioned to Oil and Natural [Gas](#) Corp., or ONGC, to explore and produce hydrocarbon in the [state](#). Big oil fields were discovered by Oil india Ltd in Nahorkotia and in other neighbouring areas and subsequently ONGC also discovered few oil/ [gas](#) fields. Three more refineries were built in Guwahati ,Bongaigoan and Numoligarh. An oil transportation pipeline was initially built to transport the crude oil from Assam to Barauni at Bihar [state](#). The combined production from both the oil companies have been maintaining more than 4 million tons a year for a long time. In 2016 the [state](#)'s average crude oil production was 4.4 million tons.

Tea industry in Assam is also a huge industry. Hats off to those Britishers who initiated the tea cultivation even to the remotest places of the [state](#) where there was no infrastructure, no man power available to cultivate the tea. They managed to bring a huge contingent of labour force from other parts of [india](#) and develop the tea gardens. Assam still produces more than half of Indias total tea production amounting more than 600 million ton kg of tea a year. Unfortunately

till now the industry has not been able to make much progress to modernize as should have been done by expansion or by developing the downstream tea associated products as could be seen in countries like Japan . [One](#) of the major reasons is the rapid indianization of the industry. The sterling companies were gradually acquired by local individuals or local companies. Most of the locals wealthy Indians who acquired the gardens did not possess the adequate knowledge and skills to modernize the industry. The local Government also acquired huge number of gardens, but most of those are running at loss only due to poor management. There is ample opportunity to develop this industry to different [level](#) provided the Government has a will to do it.

Thanks to the wealth generated by both the oil and tea industries, it was a golden opportunity to channel some of the earnings for the [welfare](#) of the society. However, it doesn't seem that the concept was even existent at the time. The lack of knowledge, vision and capability of the local government, the [state](#) is still in a poor condition which otherwise could have been an eye shore to rest of the Indian. Assam is a [state](#) rich in other natural resources also like coal, limestone, bamboo, timber and other agricultural products. Its land is highly fertile because Holy [Brahmaputra](#) river flows through the [state](#) and there is also potential to develop fishery sector.

Despite inherent advantages, unfortunately, Assam has suffered from lack of development for the last several decades. Even in the tea industry with no proper knowledge on tea technology or management skills many profitable gardens have gone burst.

It is sad to note that the [state](#) having enormous potential has not been able to harness its natural resources to its desired [level](#). The wealth generated from such resources has not been ploughed back in the [state](#) as a result of which the [state](#) is lacking in economic development and prosperity of its people. Situation is such that most of the students go out of the [state](#) for higher education and n for better future. There is no shortage of talents in the [state](#). But most brain drain are occurring to USA, Canada , England, Australia and Singapore and these migrant Assamese are doing extremely well in those countries. There are many [engineering](#) colleges in the [state](#) but not having enough [job](#) opportunities they go to different parts of the country. It is known that only in Bangaluru more than 6,000 Assamese are working in different sectors. Handful of engineers are absorbed in the oil industries, rest of the engineers graduating from various institutions normally go out of the [state](#). Today any IT firm can be established in any small town. There is ample scope to establish IT back offices in the various parts of the [state](#). If the [state](#) Government facilitates establishment of IT parks, many companies will be attracted. There is enormous scope to modernize the offices systems and records in the [state](#).

The question is why such brain drain is occurring. Can we not have some master plans to utilize the natural resources and human resources to transform this [state](#) of Assam to a much more progressive [state](#)? Opportunities are there, but only need is iron will, domain knowledge on various fields, determination and dedication. There is possibility to transform this [state](#) to different prosperity [level](#). Utmost emphasis is to be give for zero tolerance on corruption practice in the system.

MIGHTY BRAHMAPUTRA

The Assam [state](#) is blessed due to the mighty [Brahmaputra](#) river flowing from the [east](#) to the west of the [state](#). The river can be a big potential not only to irrigation , fishery and for transportation of goods. However due to a massive earth quake in 1950 the river bed got elevated and further gradual deposition of silts and sands with time has risen the river bed further. During monsoon season flood creates a havoc in the [state](#) inundating all the areas in both sides of the river banks devastating all crops, farmers houses, cattles etc. Every year hundreds of millions of dollars damages is inflicted to the [state](#) and to the people. Government has created a separate division of flood control and irrigation department to contain the flood. Hundreds of millions of dollars are sanctioned but without any apparent [success](#). Inadequate and ill designed Embankments are made which get eroded and never lasts long. Such temporary acts can never resolve the main problem. Further it is a very common say that due to corruption practices only part of the total funds are directed for real flood control project. Such half hearted [stop](#) gap arrangements will never solve the problems of flooding which brings misery to the [state](#) every year. The problem needs pragmatic solution. The rising river bed has to be lowered by dredging. In the British era, the [Brahmaputra](#) was regularly dredged. Post-Independence, the healthy tradition was given up and attempted to control the flood by building some embankments.

Dredging of the [Brahmaputra](#) river will have a great positive impact on the economy. The river is connected to the sea flowing via [Bangladesh](#) . It has been learned that [Bangladesh](#) is still continuing dredging their part of the river to facilitate river transportation of goods to interior parts of the country. What [India](#) needs is to do their part of dredging the river from [east](#) to west and make the river transportation of goods up to sea ports. River transportation will reduce the cost of transportation of goods to a great extent and allow more businesses to flourish. Such a huge river gives enormous potential to fishery industries and promote river excursions for tourists. The silt and sand recovered from the dredging can also be utilized in building two high ways in both the banks of the river and many industrial parks and new towns can be developed . Hundreds of millions of dollars of crops can be saved . Though the investment will be very big but the benefits will be many folds compared to the investment.

The above concept has been accepted by the central government and it is learnt that a huge amount of fund has been already sanctioned for this purpose. Hope this time it is not an empty promise by the government. People of the [state](#) are desperate from the yearly suffering from the floods.

Singapore's Assam Association has held discussions with Assam Industrial [Development](#) Corporation to understand the kind of business opportunities for foreign investors in the [state](#) with a view to assist the [state](#) to connect potential investors from South East Asia. There are several projects in the pipeline and the association is ready to help the [state](#) Government to link private investors with the government.

There is some sense of hope that has been created by the announcement of big ticket projects. It remains to be seen whether they will be implemented professionally and if so, what will be the duration.

The government has already sanctioned a huge sum of money for the [Brahmaputra](#) project. Fortunately the current central Government has realized that [North East](#) is the gate way of extending its business opportunity to the South East Asia.

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITY

As mentioned above , Assam has an oil driven industry, both upstream and downstream, from crude exploration to refining products . Both the national oil exploration production companies ONGC and Oil [India](#) are fully engaged to develop its hydrocarbon resources. However both the companies have enough scopes to optimize the production and minimize the cost of production. The [state](#) needs to further develop on petrochemical plants , produce plastics and related products etc. As of now, there is hardly any [indigenous](#) value added products that are available in the [state](#). North [east](#) is [green](#), rich in forestry products. There is enormous potential for further growth of tea and ancillary industries, agricultural products , fishery industries etc

Not only Assam, but the whole of the Northeast [India](#) is known for its wealth of herbs and is an appropriate center for manufacture of Ayurvedic medicines and give treatment to patients for various ailments. So far not much work has been done in this sector. A mega scale Ayurveda hub can be developed in the region. Divya [Yog](#) Mandir founded by Swami Shankar [Dev](#) and taken forward by his disciple, Swami Ramdev under the Patanjali brand, has done some work in the Ayurvedic field but there is still enormous scope for developing precious herbal plantation, Organic fruits, vegetables, food processing plants etc.

TOURISM

The whole north [east India](#) is last [green](#) through out the year. Except the [Brahmaputra](#) valley rest of the areas are all hilly with magnificent scenic beauty. Assam has the only one horn rhino park in the world called kaziranga. The scenic beauties of the tea gardens offer a great tea tourism opportunity. The tourists arrival to the north [east](#) is increasing heavily with each year. Any business related to tourism industry offers a great potential for growth.

The rich culture of Assam and the north [east](#) also attracts tourists. Assamese bihu folk [dance](#) has acclaimed a world wide recognition as one of the best folk dances in the world. Unfortunately not many people outside of [India](#) know of tourism sites in the north [east India](#). [One](#) of the main reason is poor publicity and poor connectivity to the [state](#) from overseas. Assam Association of Singapore made many presentations to various audiences of Singapore with tourism material given by the Tourism depart of Assam. Druk air is the only international air line having some flights from Guwahati to [Bangkok](#). Druk of Bhutan also operates flights from Singapore to Paro Bhutan via Kolkata. The [writer](#) personally approached with few other dynamic members of Singapore Assam Association to the Managing Director of Druk air in Singapore and convinced them that the air line will benefit a lot if they extend the flight further from [Bangkok](#) to Singapore. The association provided lot of information in this regard and we are pleased to note that Druk air will be [soon](#) have direct flights from Guwahati to Singapore. We are sure that once that flight is operative, we will notice flood of more tourists from South East Asia. Hope the [state](#) will accordingly gear up its other tourism related facilities and resources for the tourists.

Since mid-2014, with special attention given by the central government for the north [east](#) region's development, the local Government is also encouraged to promote business opportunities in the region. It is unfortunate that the previous government did not do much to develop the region . Any way better late than never.

The law makers of the country did not incorporate minimum educational qualification requirement for the members of parliament nor for the [state](#) assembly . As a result of which many of the legislators, [ministers](#) do not have adequate qualification nor domain knowledge in their respective fields to run the departments effectively. This becomes a big set back in the ministries for effective result oriented developments. In 1986, the [writer](#) went to Indonesia as an Oil Advisor to the Govt of Indonesia to guide Pertamina, the national oil company of the country. He was surprised to note that in various [ministry](#) the [ministers](#) of the respective department had to have a master degree in the respective fields. The benefit of the Presidential form of government can allow the [President](#) to select very well qualified professionals in respective ministries. If we could have also followed such [policy](#), the country would have achieved a different [level](#) of [success](#) . Since the constitution can not be changed easily ,so alternatively if we can deploy high qualified professionals as advisers under each [ministry](#) to guide and help [policy](#) creation and in effective management of the projects. It will surely help the [state](#) to a great extent in better project development and execution. Lack of integrity also hinders the progress. Project funds are not effectively utilized. However under the leadership of Mr Norendra Modi as prime minister, the country has seen much progress in containing corruptions and demanding more accountability than before and people are hopeful that in few years time if this momentum continues the country will witness progress in all areas, especially in the [North East](#) due to its vast natural resources .

In Singapore with the great vision of the founding [father](#) of the nation late Lee KuanYew turned Singapore to one of the most prosperous Nation in the world in spite not having any natural resources . The great vision, iron will of the founding [father](#) of the nation made the country one of the most prosperous nation in the world. He emphasized on human resources. His principle was that smart people are the biggest assets and they are the resource to develop the country. So he emphasized on three things, those are meritocracy, meritocracy and also more meritocracy. Ensured that right talents should be placed in right places irrespective of where they can be sourced out. So they hired smart people from all around the world. Government ensured that there is zero tolerance for corruption. Demanded full accountability from each [ministry](#) for their goals and objectives set by the Government. Because of such policies , Singapore has become one of the most prosperous nation in the world. Singapore lacks in natural resources , but it has still undertaken the journey into the hallowed world of developed countries . Talented Indians, alongside people with origin from almost all major countries of the world, have contributed to the development of Singapore.

In Assam, the public has pinned its hopes on the incumbent government to transform the region to prosperity by proper planning, selecting right people for various projects , bring transparency to all [level](#). Since there are enormous potential on execution of mega projects , the [state](#) should encourage international investors to engage in mega projects like dredging of [Brahmaputra](#) , building of toll [roads](#) , river bridges , power sector, energy sector ,petro chemical

industries and in tourism related sectors. International investors will surely be attracted provided the policies are clear ,ensure proper law and order situation in the [state](#) and good connectivity to the [state](#) is established.

Dr Dilip Borthakur

Dilip Borthakur, a petroleum engineer turned businessman and consultant, is also the President of Assam Association, Singapore.

ON THIS DAY

BJP leader likely to surrender

Congress demands CM's resignation

Durga puja ends in Kokrajhar

Award for BVFCL Daily Bazaar Puja

Dalai Lama to visit Manipur on October 17

RELATED

Zubeen Garg: Assam, Society and the Rhythm of a Universal Vision

Lost Winters and Tropical Nights

Surviving patriarchy beyond care

Lakes: The lifeblood of our planet

The Importance of Libraries in Rural India
