

U.S. warming up to Northeast India



Comments 1



Syed Miraz Ahmed 20 November 2013 26402 views

Keeping with the U.S.' interest in India's Look East Policy the American Center, Kolkata for the first time organized an Alumni Entrepreneurship Road Show & Mentorship Program in the city capital recently. It aims to forge a long-term relationship with the alumni of the U.S. State-Department's professional exchange programs and encouraging young leaders and entrepreneurs.

India's Look East policy was framed to cultivate extensive economic and strategic relations with the nations of Southeast Asia in order to bolster its standing as a regional power and a counterweight to the strategic influence of the People's Republic of China. Initiated in 1991, it marks a strategic shift in India's perspective of the world.

The Alumni Entrepreneurship Road Show, an interactive networking event for aspiring entrepreneurs, students and young professionals was conducted by some of the most successful entrepreneur business leaders in the northeast. Five Northeast business leaders, all alumni of U.S. State Department Exchange Programs conducted the youth engaging workshop, providing them with pointers to make them aware of the climate for entrepreneurship in the country, proven entrepreneurial and stories of success and failure, leads for potential sources of capital and emerging collaborative opportunities.

The U.S. Consulate in Kolkata has a major interest and regional role to play in public diplomacy and trade. Its Consular region includes 10 states with 170 million people which is about 14 per cent of India's population and 11 per cent of India's GDP. Assam is a key economic center of its Consular district producing 60 per cent of India's tea, 40 per cent of its onshore crude oil and 31 per cent of onshore natural gas production.

The Alumni Mentorship program had 25 young alumni leaders host a mentoring and training event for one hundred young leaders selected from the Northeast focused on entrepreneurship, women's empowerment, human rights, global health and the environment. The participants competed for a grant where they will work on a sustainable community service project or a training program.

Deputy Director of the American Center Rachel Sunden and Northeast India alumni Szarita Laitphlang and Rosanna Lyngdoh from Meghalaya, Gumjum Haider from Arunachal Pradesh, Yumnam Rupachandra Singh from Manipur, Cressida Jamir and Jesmina Zeliang from Nagaland; Jahnabi Phookan, Dr. Syed Iftikar Ahmed and Atreyee Borooah from Guwahati were the panelists during the session. At the interaction, Ms. Sunden shared insights about the U.S. State Department's Professional Exchange Programs and the American Center's involvement and initiatives for engaging its alumni of such programs in Northeast India.

When the U.S. Consulate General Helen LaFave first visited Assam in September 2013, she interacted with students of the prestigious Cotton College in Guwahati which was facilitated by the Youth Forum for Foreign Policy (YFFP).

YFFP is an independent, nonpartisan and non-profit initiative lead by Gaurav Gogoi, son of Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi. It seeks to develop an informed and substantive dialogue on foreign policy issues among India's youth and to ensure that India's foreign policy is more responsive to the concerns of the youth. It endeavors to connect Foreign Policy Stakeholders (policy makers, government officials, members of political parties, policy think tanks) and youth groups from India and abroad on the same platform to discuss specific thematic and regional foreign policy issues. LaFave also met the local alumni of various U.S. Department of State-funded exchange programmes including the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP), civil society leaders and local NGO members.

Asked about the process of selection for the Consulate Programmes, Deputy Director of the American Center Rachel Sunden said, "We look for the best qualified people and the best fit. The process is a year round process. Myself, my colleagues from the Consulate were constantly traveling all over our districts which includes the Northeast, Bihar and Jharkhand. We are traveling all over setting appointment for meeting up people, reading papers, magazines, watching the news and we are looking at what people are doing and when we see somebody doing amazing work, we work very hard to know them." The candidates are nominated for programmes of specific interest to the U.S. Department, she added.

It is to be noted that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has approved a US\$2.6 billion development package partly from the US for the states of Assam and Manipur. While the package brings in promises for development; security analysts however, take this in different light. According to them investments mean visits and visits mean deployment of unmanned sensors in strategic locations thus opening up India's underbelly.

Syed Miraz Ahmed

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BY SYED MIRAZ AHMED

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