

Information Technology Policy of Assam, 2009: Towards an Inclusive Alternative

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Information technology (IT) has important role in the present day global economy which makes it one of the fastest growing sectors of the world economy. The information technology has found its application in almost every field of our life starting from the basic social infrastructure of health, education to communication technology and areas of higher research like space research, bio-informatics etc. The significant changes brought about by the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has provided impetus for spatial merger of the global economy thereby changing the trade dynamics and nature of relationship among the nations in the name of globalisation. The role of Information Technology in case of Indian economy is growing with the greater emphasis on the industrial development in the post independence period and the revolution in the field of communication in the late nineties of the last century. It is reflected in the growing emphasis for the development of information technology by the means of the government policies. Government of Assam has recognised the importance of information technology in modern age which pervades all spheres of our life and therefore formulate various policies over the period of time to use IT for achieving the various priorities of development. It further desire to make Assam a leading destination for the investment in Information and Communication Technology industry thereby making it major partner in the field of information economy. Assam government passed Information Technology Policy of Assam, 2009 to fulfil the above stated needs of the time for the period of five years. There is a need to assess the basic tenets of this policy and evaluate it at the juncture when a new policy is going to be adopted in the coming years.

As per the policy published by the Assam Gazette, Extraordinary dated August 4, 2009; the giving primary significance to the development of information and communication technology industry in Assam is one of the main objectives of the policy. It also seeks to reduce poverty in the state. Another objective of the policy is to increase the use of information technology in government sector and hence to achieve 'efficiency, transparency, accountability and increased productivity'. The policy sees the immense potential of the use

of information technology in diverse sectors of the society like in the field of Tele-Medicine and the related areas, E-Tourism, E-Commerce, E-Education etc. Thus, the policy recognised the diverse applicability of the information technology to bring the overall development of the economy and society.

Without going further into the details of the policy, it is essential to see the Information Technology policy of Assam in the context of specific socio-economic and demographic situation of the state to evaluate its significance. The strategic location of the Assam in North-East India and its socio-political history always got importance in the study of the region. Assam constitutes 78,348 sq km, which is 2.4 percent of the country's total area. The geographical features of the state are marked by internal diversities. The state also has diverse population from various religions and communities who are at various stages of the socio-economic development.

According to 2001 census, Assam had population of 26,655,528. The analysis of the performance of the state in the basic human development indicators like health status, education, poverty etc helps us to assess the significance of the various government policies for people of the state. Assam had the literacy rate of 63.25% which is lower than the national average of the 65.2%. The poverty level of the state is not encouraging with 57.15% of the total population of the state living below poverty line as per as the estimate in 1997-98 against the all India average of the 51.23%. The high dependence of the people on the primary activities like agriculture is the special feature of the economy that creates immense demand for the natural resources like land, forest.

Maternal Mortality rate (MMR), Infant Mortality rate (IMR), Life Expectancy, Availability of the health care institutions are some of the basic indicators of the situation of the health sector of a state. As per the Report of the Director of Economics and Statistics of 2001-2002, the MMR of Assam was 76 per thousand live births in 2001 but the national average of 71.25. The birth rate of Assam was 26.8 against the national average of 29.50. Death rate in Assam is 9.5 against the national average of 9.8. The life expectancy of the state is 54.93 against 59 for the India. While the birth rate and death rate is lower than the national average, but it can not be attributed to the policy intervention only as various socio-cultural factors also play an important role in determining these factors. The state had only 4.8 hospitals for 1, 00, 000 population as of 2004. The inaccessible terrain in some places of the

state with the natural disaster like flood, epidemics like malaria make the situation worse. The state has very low access to education as well with only 1.23 high schools per 10,000 populations. The state is not industrially developed inspite of the vast resource potential of the state. The state has very low energy consumption which indicates the low level of industrial development of the state. The state had only 19, 039 (77.13%) villages electrified out of 24,685 villages as of 31st March 2003. Besides every household of the villages donot have access to the electricity and those who have access also, have to suffer from the very frequent power cuts. The work participation rate of any region also indicates the economic situation of any region. In 2001, work participation rate of the state was only 35.8% with WPR for male 49.87% and 21.61% for the female.

After considering the socio-economic situation of the state, it will be interesting to look into the Information Technology Policy and the role that it can play in the overall socio-economic development of the state. The immense potential that the Information Technology has to change the socio-economic scenario of any region can be fully utilised when it is moulded to meet the structural needs of the region. If it goes against it, it may create disaster rather than bringing any benefits.

The Assam government understand the immense potential that the information technology has to tackle the socio economic problems faced by the state. Employment generation is major challenge faced by the country along with the state and so the policy gave importance to take necessary steps for the promotion of the IT industry that can provide the gainful employment for the people of Assam. It gave importance in the design of the systems and programmes that can enhance the employment potential of the educated unemployed youth of the state in the ICT sector. For this, they further put emphasis on the setting up of the ICT infrastructure like communication networks, IT parks, BPO and Knowledge cities along with various related services. The Policy also recognised need of studies and surveys to see the role of the information technology in creation of investment and employment possibilities. To enable the youth to acquire the necessary skill and knowledge which can make them highly employable, the policy emphasise the encouragement and acceleration of the use of information technology in schools, colleges and educational institutions. To prepare skilled manpower within the state of Assam, the policy aimed for the set up of the ICT colleges and specialised training institutes in the private and the joint sector. Infact, the

essential element for the successful implementation of the policy in the state is Manpower Development Programme (MDP) in the area of computer application.

Besides the policy emphasised the need of using the IT to increase the efficiency of the delivery of the government services. The spread in the use of the IT sector and creation of the platform for the same was another objective of the policy. For this to happen so that the state can achieve important position in the IT sector, the policy also tries to encourage the participation of the private sector. It also put emphasis the growth of the IT sector so that the state can become the important destination for the IT units both from within the country and outside.

The role of the policy in the empowerment of the socially disadvantaged groups of the society is immense. The policy specifically aimed at the programmes and schemes that can make the participation of the women in IT sector both for employment and entrepreneurship. The policy further put emphasis on the development of special programmes and training modules for the differently abled and challenged segments of the society so that it can provide them employment in the IT and the related sectors.

Policy had some specific strategies which are designed to achieve the broad objectives of the, the Information Technology Policy. These strategies are categorised as ‘Government to Government (G2G) strategies, Government to Business (G2B) Strategies, Government to Citizens (G2C) Strategies, ICT intervention in Education Sector, National e-Governance Plan, Strengthening of Government Institutions, IT Infrastructure development and Growth strategies, Security Policy, Implementation of the IT Act,2000, GIS and Mapping Policy, Data Mining and Data Warehousing policy, Anti Piracy Policy, and Investment Promotion Policy’. Thus multi-dimensional strategies for the implementation of the IT policy can have long term beneficial effects if they are utilised properly.

Although, the Policy is an improvement over the Assam Information Technology Policy, 2000; it had the scope of further improvement considering the specificity of the state characterised by the socio-economic and cultural situation. The worsening employment situation of the state is major problem facing by the educated youth along with the rest part of the country and the aim of the policy to increase the employment potential by giving necessary skills besides increasing the IT infrastructure is major boost for employment generation. But the introduction of the IT education is not enough considering the lack of

necessary education infrastructure itself. Therefore, the initial aim should be to provide the necessary education infrastructure within the reach of all sections of society. Similar is the case with the health infrastructure. Thus, the getting the benefits of the IT sector without having basic infrastructure will not happen.

Considering the cultural context of the state, it is needed to use IT through the small enterprises rather than through big industries so that it can cater the needs of the subaltern sections of the society rather than that of the elites. The policy can meet the needs of the common people only when it is used for the development of the plans and programmes which have direct relation with their day to day life. The emphasis should be on the meeting primary needs of the citizens rather than working for the profit maximisation through industrialisation. For this, emphasis should be given on the primary sector like agriculture, resource management etc through the IT that can directly help the common people.

Thus, the role of the IT sector can not be neglected in the globalised world. Although, Information Technology Policy of Assam 2007 have been able to visualise the needs of the time but, to achieve the goal through inclusive way, there is need to go beyond the western approach of skill and manpower development in the IT sector. When it can meet the needs of each and every common people, than only the policy can do the justice.

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