

A geographical snapshot of the Northeast

My father and I visited Guwahati, the largest city in the northeast region of India, to gain a better understanding of a region which not only has one of the lowest population densities (4% of the population lives on 8% of India's land mass) but also tends to be incredibly diverse in terms of ethnicity, language, culture and religion. Guwahati is situated along the Brahmaputra river (the river originates in Tibet, flows through Arunachal Pradesh, passes through the Assam valley, cuts through Bangladesh and merges with the Padma before emptying into the Bay of Bengal) and is the capital of the state of Assam, which is bordered by seven other north-east states (West Bengal, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and Meghalaya) and two neighbouring countries (Bhutan and Bangladesh). In fact, the only north-eastern state not bordering Assam is Sikkim, which sits between Bhutan and Nepal.

Constructive chaos in Guwahati

Having visited a number of Indian cities and towns in the last 3 years I have created a sort of mental categorization of where different cities chart on my spectrum of change. Guwahati would place somewhere on the extreme right for the rate of change that is underway. Like so many emerging cities in India, Guwahati has two very different personalities - one is the old, dust cloud filled

market image (Paltan and Fancy bazaar) where each trade has its own little alley. The other is the emerging, high street style area (G.S. Road) with new age branded stores lined up along a 5 km stretch on one of Guwahati's main road arteries - I counted two Pizza Huts, three KFCs, all the major sportswear brands, a host of Indian apparel retailers and a dozen motorcycle dealerships. The old is dilapidated, crowded, filled with pungent odours and a derelict web of overhead wires and cables. Nowhere has the disparity been so distinct. In fact, upon crossing the railway line that divides up Fancy bazaar into two halves and distinctly separates the fruits and vegetables lanes from the fish and meat alleys, I was surprised to find a ~10,000 sq ft *Tanishq* branded jewellery store - a sign, perhaps of the new Guwahati beginning its subtle invasion of the old. Despite presence of pan-Indian brands, the region still seems untapped.

Driving to Shillong

The three hour drive from the Guwahati to the capital of Meghalaya was fascinating - not only because of the largely unspoiled environs but also for the ability to peek into passing villages - a way of life which appears very unchanged. It will be very interesting to see how the four lane road which is being built along this corridor brings change to these villages as their residents get increasingly exposed to people and produce from

elsewhere. I cannot underscore enough the vibrancy I saw among the youth of Shillong - perhaps the most fashion conscious Indians I have come across. In fact, that in combination with their unique ethnic features made me feel like I wasn't in the India I've grown accustomed to - a recurring reminder of the sheer diversity of those who call India home.

Banking on banking licenses in a fish market

As I was walking through the hot, dusty Jaggiroad fish market about 80km away from Guwahati after a two hour second-class train ride, I received a message that IDFC was given an approval to start a bank. I continued reading, looking up only occasionally, my eyes squinting under the glaring sun. As I finished, I was under the shade of the only concrete building in an otherwise nondescript area. Looking away from the phone, I read a sign above me "*Ka HDFC Bank, Jaggiroad branch*". Undoubtedly, banking is a brick and mortar business. Building a successful one will take diligence and patience. However, I would highlight to sceptics that while regulatory costs may be high at the onset, they pale in comparison to the lakhs of crores (billions) telecom companies pay up for spectrum. I remain optimistic on IDFC's prospects, but as always, reserve the right to be wrong.

I invite your comments (soumil@dmzpartners.in)



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