The image of Northeast that is etched on the minds of most is of a land where violence, disasters and ethnic clashes are the order of the day. But it also has the other side which has not made the due impact in other parts of the country. This is the case with the citizens of the region as well. The North-East has a number of worthwhile luminaries to its credit. The following write-up shows the impressive achievements of some of the sons of this region. They have not only dared to dream big, but have also done the region and the country proud by their achievements.

In the collective consciousness of India, the Northeast is like a long forgotten, distant relative: one who exists somewhere; who is at the bottom of the priority list and about whom many misconceptions abound in the family. Little wonder then that most Indians carry a stereotypical image about the seven sisters and its people - violence, disasters, ethnic clashes are what instantly come to mind when any reference to the Northeast is made. True, violence is omnipresent. Disasters and ethnic clashes are more frequent here. But that’s only half the picture. The other half hardly gets the space it deserves in the nation’s thoughts.

A Bhupen Hazarika or a Ratan Thiyam is an exception to the general lack of information on the region’s achievers, its successful high-fliers. But if non-Northeasterners are guilty of indifference towards the region, we, in the Northeast, are equally culpable of not taking pride in our own triumphs and achievements. We have got into a collective habit of always looking at the downside; to bemoan what we lack.

Mainstream India stereotypes the seven states of the Northeast as centres of insurgency and violence. It’s time we dismantle this absurd cliché and showcase the great achievements of its multicultural ethos and communities. We, for instance, do not take pride in the fact that a Bodo from the backwaters of a small place like Gossaigaon reached the pinnacle of his IPS career to head the elite National Security Guards (NSG) and subsequently the Border Security Force (BSF). Ranjit Shekhar Mooshahary may have been an IPS officer from the Kerala cadre but doesn’t he belong to this region? Doesn’t HT Sangliana belong to the Northeast? Yes, the same Sangliana, a Mizo, who became the much-feared top cop in Karnataka, on whose life at least three feature films were made and who is now a Lok Sabha MP from Bangalore. The Mizos can justifiably take pride in the fact that they have two Lok Sabha MPs when there is only one Lok Sabha seat from the state! Isn’t former Chief Election Commissioner JM Lyngdoh from this region? The same Lyngdoh who won the Magsaysay award in 2003 for his exceptional moral courage to call the spade a spade in Gujarat?

And yet, we in the Northeast do not seem to take these achievers as role models. We, or at least many of us, perhaps do not know that there are several NRIs who made it big in the United States and Europe. Jupiter Yambem went from distant Imphal to New York to head the famous revolving restaurant atop the now destroyed World Trade Centre. Jitendra Gopal Borpujari from Jorhat retired as temporary alternate to Executive Director of International Monetary Fund (IMF) and is now consultant to the Executive Director of the World Bank. Deepak Jain, who used to be a student of Gauhati University, today heads the prestigious Kellogs Business School. Isn’t this something to be proud of?

This beautiful region of pristine landscapes and multiple cultures is full of people who are doing interesting, positive and constructive work. Do we know that a schoolteacher from Salakati in
Kokrajhar district, Malti Rani Narzary, has adapted the traditional Bodo designs to the needs of modern fashion and created a market for them in places like Delhi and Bangalore. Narzary’s craft is now being retailed in the Taj Group’s chain of hotels.

Do we know that half-a-dozen footballers from Manipur are leading players in the football league in Goa and Kolkata? Or a farmer’s cooperative in Kokrajhar has taken to patchouli farming (shrub/leaves of the mint family) in a big way and is now running a plant that extracts fragrant oil that is used to make globally famous perfumes in France? Are we aware that an ordinary entrepreneur in upper Assam now supplies shampoo bottles and sachets to Hindustan Lever and provides livelihood to 30 families after taking a big, risky bank loan of Rs 90 lakh?

There are 110-odd journalists from this region working in various media houses in Delhi and doing well. At least half-a-dozen others are excelling in places like Hyderabad and Pune. Arnab Goswami, an Assamese, heads Times Now, TOI’s foray into TV news. Rupam Borah is an important decision-maker in the competitive world of advertising. Three successive chairmen-cum-managing directors of India’s largest company, ONGC, have been from this region.

Even the state governments, often criticised for being corrupt, slothful and indifferent to the needs of the common people, show results in the most unexpected manners. Two examples should suffice: communitisation of services and public institutions in Nagaland and computer literacy programmes for schools in Assam.

Communitisation of services and public institutions is a novel initiative of the government of Nagaland that has developed a synergy between the community and the government. This programme has created a sense of ownership of public institutions and better management of limited resources. The Nagaland Communitisation of Public Institutions and Services Act, 2002, to cover power, water supply and education sectors empowers the community to own, manage and control government schools by vesting them with legal powers and responsibilities. In neighbouring Assam, an ambitious computer literacy programme named after Rajiv Gandhi has started imparting free computer education to more than four lakh students in 630 government higher secondary schools.

Ratan Thiyam is a renowned name in theatre circles worldwide. The latest to make a splash in the international arena is an unlikely Tibetan monk. Ngawang Tashi Bapu, who has been nominated for a Grammy in the ‘Best Traditional Music Category’, is based at the Centre for Himalayan Culture and Studies at Dahung, in Arunachal Pradesh. Lama Tashi had been the principal chant master of the Dalai Lama’s Drepung Loseling Monastery in South India before returning to Arunachal to take up his present assignment in early 2004. The multi-phonic chants for which the Lama has gained so much acclaim are a “totally different kind of music,” as he says. It’s a genre that is beginning to make waves in the West. Lama Tashi will fly to the US next week for the 48th annual Grammy Awards function, where Mariah Carey, Christina Aguilera, Sheryl Crow, U2, Bruce Springsteen and Eric Clapton are also expected to participate. In Dahung, Bomdila and Tawang, the younger monks are holding special prayers for their musical guru so that he can return victorious.

Most of us in the media have failed to focus on them since profiling achievers, writing about positive events and doing development reports takes time, energy and money. Instead, we concentrate on law and order, killings, insurgency and all things negative. Doing a report on killings and interviewing an underground leader on e-mail is definitely easier than travelling to distant corners of this difficult region and reporting from the spot. Besides, we give disproportionate importance to what politicians say.

Let us learn a lesson from the brave mothers and women of Manipur, who taught the Northeast and the entire nation the great art of relentless non-violent struggle: in the anti-liquor struggle, in the self-
identity movement, in the huge, protracted protests after Manorama’s rape and murder by Assam Rifles men, and in the concerted fight against the draconian Armed Forces Special Powers Act, which goes on till this day. When the police fire indiscriminately, the mothers stand as vanguard; when a woman’s dignity is violated, mothers strip themselves in front of the Assam Rifles headquarters. From the fine, classical arts to the classical struggles in Manipur, are we ready to uphold this great narrative of hope and courage for the whole world to see?

Nitin A. Gokhale, currently Senior Editor Defence and Strategic Affairs with NDTV, India’s leading 24-hour News Channel—is a veteran journalist with over 24 years experience in media behind him.

In his varied career, Gokhale has launched and edited a couple of newspapers in northeast India, worked for magazines like Sunday, Outlook and Tehelka, and made and anchored several documentaries. Having travelled and reported extensively from eastern India, northeastern India and South Asia for over 23 years , his writings on this complex and often troubled region set a benchmark for others to follow.

Although a Marathi, Gokhale chose to specialise in India’s Northeast, its insurgency and the army’s counter-insurgency operations. Through his travels to the remotest corners of the region and interaction with several underground outfits leaders’ and army troops on ground he acquired an insider’s view on the troubled region . As a result, his writings show a rare combination of compassion and deep knowledge about the northeast. Simultaneously, Gokhale is also well known for his reportage on defence matters and particularly his coverage on the Kargil war for Outlook in 1999 . Since March 2006, he is heading NDTV’s Defence and Strategic Affairs beat.

A reputed journalism teacher and resource person at various seminars and workshops on subjects of defence and terrorism, Gokhale has three authoritative books—one on Assam’s tea industry vis-a-vis militancy, another one on Illegal Migration from Bangladesh into Assam and one on the Kaziranga National Park—to his credit.