

Development of North Bengal Region through North East Council (NEC): Perspectives and Challenges

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Abstract

The repeated unrest and long imbroglio in different parts of North Bengal which resulted in the economic deprivation, social injustice and mainstream political defamation fascinated the author to evaluate, examine and assess the issues and problems associated with the region. Hence, the present study is a sincere attempt to identify and analyze the various socio-political, economic, cultural issues of North Bengal region and to recommend possible solutions. The study focuses on the issue of socio-economic development of the people and place of North Bengal through North East Council. However, there have been wide spread speculations that whether NEC is capable of fulfilling the aspirations of the people of North Bengal or not. The focus of the study is to examine the possibilities, pros and cons of the inclusion of North Bengal into the North East Council. Both primary as well as secondary data have been used to complete the project.

Key Words: *Economic Deprivation, social justice, people's aspiration, political participation, social inclusion*

Introduction

North Bengal is an important part of the state of West Bengal in India. It is the bouquet of myriad cultures, languages, ethnicity, literatures, folk and music etc. Hence, it is often regarded as 'mini India'. The region is also well known for its bio diversity, soothing climate and mesmerizing scenic beauty. However, since last couple of decades the region witnessed several violent agitations and unrests. The most prominent among them are the violent agitation of 1980s in Darjeeling followed by the movement of 2007, 2013 and 2017 consecutively. During the different phases of this agitation, thousand lives have been lost; enormous public properties have been vanquished but still the fulfillment of the aspiration of the people of Darjeeling Hills seems to be distant dream. Similarly, another notable movement in this region is known as Naxalite Movement which erupted in 1967 from the small area called Naxalbari of Siliguri Subdivision and spread steadily in other parts of the country. This uprising was also known as a violent peasant movement against the social inequality, economic deprivation and widespread exploitation of peasants in the region. The Greater Cooch Behar movement or the *Kamtapuri* Movement is another important reason of turmoil in the region. Apart from that, the various ethno-communities of this region have always raised their community centric demands in front of government for their proper socio-political or economic development. The demands and

the formation of various developmental boards in Darjeeling hills such as *Lepcha* Board, *Tamang* Board and *Bhujel* Board etc is a blatant example of community centric developmental scheme in the region. Similarly, the ethnic communities from other parts of the North Bengal region like *Meches*, *Adivasis* from Dooars, *Rajbangsis* from Coochbehar, *Mundas*, *Santhals* from other parts of the region have repeatedly raising their demands and grievances in myriad ways in front of government for their proper socio-economic upliftment.

Historical background

The region has a very rich and fascinating history. Different parts of the region have distinct and different historical settings. *Darjeeling*, *Coochbehar*, *Jalpaiguri*, *Dooars*, *Alipurduar*, *Dinajpur* etc. have distinct socio-cultural backgrounds. However, in the process of making modern India all these places formed themselves as one unit and became North Bengal region. Accordingly, Darjeeling was an integral part of the Sikkim. The two English Officials Captain Lloyd and Mr. J.W. Grant while heading towards Nepal stayed few days in Darjeeling and find the place suitable for sanatorium. As a consequence, negotiations and dialogues started between the King of Sikkim and the then English government and finally Darjeeling was transferred from the Rajah of Sikkim over to the British government in February 1935. Initially, this land involves the areas of *Darjeeling* and *Kurseong* which became Darjeeling District afterwards. Again, in the year 1866, *Kalimpong* was annexed from Bhutan and amalgamated in Darjeeling District which became the *Kalimpong* sub-division later on. Accordingly, *Coochbehar*, *Jalpaiguri*, *Alipurduar* and *Dinajpur* had their own separate kingdoms. Similarly entire dooars region was the part and parcel of Bhutan. In fact it was the main gateway to enter the Bhutan region. Hence, in the process of development or in the process of making India as a nation all these independent kingdoms and regions amalgamated into one region known as North Bengal Region.

Geo-Political and Strategic Importance of the Region

Since its inception, the region is very crucial in terms of trade and commerce, geo-political settings and strategic importance. This North Bengal region is surrounded by three international boundaries such as Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. The region is also easily connects with China through the state of Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh. The region has easy accessibility to connect with China through '*Nathula Border*' or '*Doklam Tri-Junction*' and *Tawang* region of Arunachal Pradesh. Moreover, this is the only region which connects the entire north eastern region including Sikkim with the rest of India. Thus, the lower portion of this region is often regarded as '*North Eastern Corridor*'. It is also evident from the numerous sources that the '*silk route*' which is known as one of the very oldest routes for trade and commerce between entire Asia and Europe is in fact cannot be completed without this region. There are sources which states that several Indian dharmas gurus like guru *Padmasambhava*, guru *Atisa* and guru *Tilopa* reached Tibet in different times via this silk route. Thus, the region and its routes are very important for international trade such as Indo-China trade, Indo-Nepal trade, Indo-Bhutan trade or inter-states trades. Not only that, the region is also crucial from the perspective of bio-diversity, ethno-biology and ethno-cultural settings.

Importance for Inclusion of North Bengal Region in North East Council (NEC):

The above discussion shows that both the people and the region of North Bengal have left far beyond in the process of the developmental growth and social security. The region faced an acute social exclusion, economic deprivation and political instability. It is indeed essential to state that the socio-economic development of the nearby place and the people of North East states including Sikkim are hundred times better than the people of North Bengal. Recently, the issue of inclusion of Darjeeling Hills in North East Council has been vehemently raised by certain political leaders of Darjeeling. They asserted that for the

overall development of the region, Darjeeling should be included in the North East Council. The various local leaders like Binoy Tamang, Anit Thapa and many more have mentioned their desires of inclusion of Darjeeling in North East Council in their various public speeches. However, the MP from Darjeeling constituency shri Raju Bista ji has repeatedly asserting the large social exclusion, acute economic deprivation and least social security together with the problems of employment, lack of industrialization and the issue of infiltration etc in the entire North Bengal Region. It seems that he is in favor of the inclusion of Darjeeling and North Bengal region into the North East Council. Apart from political leaders, Prof. Mahendra P. Lama a renowned academician, Chief Economic Advisor of the Government of Sikkim has also supported and advocated the idea of inclusion of Darjeeling along with the entire North Bengal region in North East Council for the proper nourishment and development of the region.

As mentioned above, the region is historically, strategically and geo-politically very important. The region is actually the only bridge which connects the entire north east region with the rest of India. Similarly, the region is surrounded by four international boundaries. Thus, very long deprivation and negligence to the region is not good for the interest of the nation. Accordingly, this is the region where Naxalite movement originated; movement of Gorkhaland is only halted for time being, not ended yet, KLO and Maoism also operate in the region. Hence, the region is very sensitive. Thus, it is indeed very essential to maintain peace and security in the region for the sake of national interest. So, inclusion of the entire region of North Bengal into the North East Council may ease that threat to the larger extend.

The idea inclusion of the region in North East Council may also help the overall development of the people and the place. The entire problems of the region such as unemployment, health and education, tea and tourism etc can be eradicated through this idea of inclusion. From the perspective of national interest also the idea of inclusion of North Bengal in the North East Council is very appropriate. Apart from that, the interstate trade and commerce between the north eastern states and other states of India can be possible only through this route of North Bengal region. Moreover, international trade and commerce such as Indo-Nepal trade, Indo-Bhutan trade, Indo-Bangladesh trade and Indo-China trade are also largely dependent on the route of this region. Thus, the frequent unrest long imbroglio in the region may largely affect the interstate trade and commerce as well as the international trade commerce. It is further imperative to state that entire north east regions including Sikkim have always been largely affected by the frequent impasse in the North Bengal region. Hence, the idea of the inclusion of North Bengal region in the North East Council can be a wise decision to ease out the present situation in the region. Further, the decision of inclusion may accelerate the smooth growth of interstate trade as well as international trade.

The Nation North East Council Forum headed by Pravin Zimba has also vehemently advocated for the inclusion of Darjeeling hills, Terai and Dooars in the North East Council. The forum asserted that historically the whole of Darjeeling including Siliguri is an integral part of Sikkim. Darjeeling and Sikkim shares its culture, language, folk and mores etc. However, it is fascinating that the Sikkim is a member of North East Council and enjoying the various socio-economic benefits and safeguards through North East Council whereas Darjeeling including all North Bengal regions is crying for its inclusion in the North East Council. The forum has repeatedly asserted regarding the demographic change of the region, particularly the lower hills of Siliguri and adjoining areas. They advocated that before the advent of Britishers in this region, the region of Darjeeling hills including Siliguri was the part of Sikkim and Kalimpong and Dooars were the part of Bhutan. Further, they are repeatedly saying that the entire regions of Darjeeling, Terai and Dooars have been deprived economically, socially and politically from last several decades in the state of West Bengal. Thus, the inclusion of the entire North Bengal region in the North East Council can be a noble initiative for socio-economic development of this region and the people.

It is indeed imperative to state that the Vision Document of the North East Council prepared by Niti Ayog, the highest planning body of the country has also mentioned the importance of the inclusion of this region in the North East Council. Prof. Lama, one of the prominent members of the Vision Document team of North East Council, vehemently advocated the strategic, geo-political and historical importance of the region. Prof. Lama ardently asserted the importance of the region as a 'chicken neck belt' and 'north east corridor'. Professor Lama and his Vision Document team has also extensively examined and discussed the importance this region in terms of interstate trade commerce and international trade. Further, the team has also thoroughly examined and discussed the importance of the region from the perspective of national security and national interest. The construction of roadways in the region such as Asian highways and the project like OBOR One belt One Route initiated by China further exaggerated the threat of national security to a larger extend. Hence, taking into consideration of all the matters and after prolonged discussion and examination the team finally submits its report of Vision Document of North east Council to the government of India. The report of Vision Document of the North east council suggested and recommended the inclusion of the region of North Bengal in the North East Council. Because they perceived that the inclusion of the region in the North East Council may eradicate the issues of exploitation, sufferings and deprivation of the people of this entire region.

North East Council

North East Council (NEC) is regarded as a nodal agency for the economic and social development of the region of North East India. This council works for the overall socio-economic development of all eight states of North Eastern India viz. Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim. This council was constituted by the act of 1971 and came into force in 7 November 1972. All eight north eastern states are the members of the North East Council. Sikkim was the last and the new member council included in the year 2002.

The headquarter of the council is located in Shilong. The council functions under the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DONER), Government of India. This Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region is entirely responsible for planning, execution and monitoring of the developmental schemes and projects in north eastern region. Its first and foremost objective is to enhance the socio-economic growth of the north eastern region.

At the beginning, the council was established as an advisory body but at present it is upgraded to regional planning body. This body examines, discusses and decides the matter in which the entire north eastern states have common interest. It also works as a mediator between interstate conflicts and quarrels. The entire funding of the council is made by the central government of India.

As per the 3 years plan issued in 2017, an annual budget of INR2500 crore has been given to the council. Out of which 40% from the government and 60% from the Non-Lapsable Central Pool of Resources (NLCPR)

The Distribution of Financial Resources spent in the fiscal year 2017 is as follows

Transport & Communication	Agriculture	Human Resource Development & Education	Power	Health	Tourism	Industry
47%	14%	11%	9%	4%	3%	3%

Achievements of North East Council

The Council has made astonishing contribution in the overall growth development of North Eastern region. It has worked tremendously and achieved remarkable results in the field of Energy plant, electricity, education, health, roadways, highways and bridges etc. Accordingly, the council also contributed marvelously for the introduction of rural women empowerment schemes in the region for the development of the rural women of the region. Further, the council has also contributed a lot for the development and growth of agriculture, tourism, and husbandry and many more other schemes and projects for the proper development of the people and the region. Apart from that, various other programmes and projects have been carried out by the government for the overall development and growth of the north east region. Some important among them are as follows

- **Niti Forum:** the Niti Forum was created by the Government to prepare plans for the development of the North East Region on 21st February 2018. The basic objective of the forum was to examine and evaluate the various proposals both at the Central and the State levels and prepare plans for the speedy growth and development of the North Eastern Region. Its first meeting was held on 10th April 2018. As per the proposal of the Niti Forum the developmental projects in the North East Region would be based on the concept of “HIRA” that is (Highways, Inland Waterways, Railways and Airways).
- **National Bamboo Mission:** Another important project of North East Council is National Bamboo Mission. The Union Finance Ministry has presented an allocation of Rs.1,290 crore in the Annual Budget for “National Bamboo Mission”. Accordingly, Dr Jitendra Singh stated that the Bamboo Mission has a special significance for the development and growth of Northeast region.
- **Sikkim air link map:** Pakyong Airport in Sikkim is also an important development of the region. It was inaugurated by Prime Minister, Narendra Modi on 24th September 2018



Digital North East Vision: Another remarkable achievement of the Council is also known as Digital North East Vision. Shri Ravi Shankar Prasad, (Union Minister for Electronics & IT), released the ‘Digital North East Vision 2022’ which emphasizes the leveraging digital technologies to transform the lives of people of the north east region and enhance ease of living.

Conclusion

It is well evident from the above discussion that the negotiation, discussion and dialogues have already been started regarding the inclusion of this ‘chicken neck corridor’ in the North East Council in various public forums. As BJP MP of Darjeeling has repeatedly arguing that the Central government is planning something big for the entire north Bengal region. Moreover, the last state assembly result in the state of West Bengal shows that the people of this region have great faith and believe in the Bharatya Janta Party or ruling party of India. It was only in North Bengal region that the BJP candidates won with thumping majority. Hence, it

seems that the ruling BJP party of India is more lenient about the people of this region. It is further evident that the native people of this region viz. *Gorkhas, Adivasis, Meches, Koches, Lepchas* etc have been deprived socially, economically and politically from last so many decades. Thus, it is an urgent need to include this socially politically and economically excluded ethno caste groups and communities into the mainstream developmental process of the nation. So, inclusion of the entire region of North Bengal in the North East Council could be the remarkable solution to eradicate the problems of this region.

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