

## **North Eastern Council and the politics of regional development in the Northeast**

Author: Parvin Sultana

Assistant Professor,

Pramathesh Barua College

Address: N. S Road, Ward No- 4

Dhubri, Assam.

PIN – 783301

*Abstract: The Northeastern region was suffering from economic backwardness since independence. Political turmoil also marked the region. Internal diversity often found manifestation in violent ethnic insurgencies. The central government tried to initiate certain policies to address the underdevelopment of the region. One such was the formation of the North Eastern Council – a regional planning body which was geared up to reduce the gap of regional disparity and initiate regional development. It was aimed to play a special role in policies like the Look East Policy. This paper will look at how development is shaped by regional politics, ethnic compulsions and the role and limitation of NEC in accommodating these.*

Keywords: regionalism, ethnicity, development, reorganisation, regional planning.

### ***Introduction***

Underdevelopment and backwardness marked the country on the eve of independence. Even after seven decades of independence the Indian nation continues to suffer from regional imbalance. While the nation has seen overall economic growth, regional disparity continues to persist. Post liberalisation the gap between regions has in fact widened. Nehru's theory of *trickledown effect* failed to percolate to the poor. The regional question became important in the face of this persistent underdevelopment of some regions. The Northeastern Region which is a hotspot of biodiversity continues to lag behind other regions. This region is both unique and complex. Being a landlocked region bounded by international

boundaries on almost all sides, its geo-strategic importance to the nation is immense. The region's physiological made up is also such that any policy initiated in one state must involve another state either as a beneficiary or as an affected party. This realisation paved way for regional development and policies to be fine tuned to the need of the region.

The region came to the centre after the decline of the Congress system and with the end of one party dominance in Indian politics. It started post 1967. And slowly regional political parties giving voice to the need of the region came to be the new king makers in our democracy. With the resurgence of regionalism the question of regional imbalance also came to the forefront. The British government developed the regions of the country in a selective manner. The sole aim was to ensure smooth movement of raw materials from the interiors of the country to the ports to be taken to Britain. Such a lopsided model of development left out huge areas and sowed the seeds of regional imbalance. On the eve of independence some states like Gujarat which was a port city, Maharashtra had a head-start over the others like Bihar, Orissa and the erstwhile undivided Assam. To correct this, the newly independent nation went for planned economic development. But while achievements of a planned approach to development are good at the macro level, when one takes a look at the micro level, there are certain gaps.

### ***Regionalism***

The resurgence of regionalism in Indian politics came mainly to bring to forefront the acute regional disparities that exist in the polity. Post 1991, with the LPG model in place, while the Indian state was constantly withdrawing making way for private capital, the states were left on their own to attract private capital investment. While some fared well, others did not do so. Regionalism asserted itself in different ways in different regions. In Northeast it was quite unique. Unlike other regions the regional question in Northeast was in a way cultivated by the centre.

The regional assertion in Northeast can be said to start with the reorganisation of the region 1971. The reorganisation came after long drawn struggle of hill tribe leaders for the right of autonomous statehood. The Eastern India Tribal Union (EITU) and All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) took lead in these movements. The erstwhile state of Assam was divided into seven states. The reorganisation of the Northeast is significant in a number of ways. It was a move away from linguistic reorganisation which was followed in the first reorganisation of 1956. The first reorganisation of 1956 failed to fulfil the aspirations of the

tribal population of the region. The SRC Report while proposing linguistic organisation of the country proposed status quo and the continued existence of a unified Assam. It did provide for Autonomous Councils and District Councils but these fell short of fulfilling the aspiration of the people. Most groups did not want anything less than separate states. And their long drawn struggles finally led to the reorganisation of the region.

As a result finally in 1971, the Parliament passed five acts- North East Areas (Reorganisation) Act, the 27<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the Constitution of India Act, the Government of the Union Territories amendment Act, the Manipur Hill Areas Act and the North East Council Act.<sup>1</sup> These acts paved the way for the reorganisation of North East India. And these developments completely ignored the SRC report so far as the north east was concerned. The blueprint for the reorganisation of the state of Assam was laid down by 1972. While some states were formed as a response to protracted popular movements like Meghalaya, Mizoram, others were in response to administrative efficiency and security concerns like Arunachal Pradesh. However a common thread that ran underlining the second reorganisation was a clear move away from the first reorganisation on linguistic basis. This move in fact gave birth to *new trends* in Indian Politics especially in context of Northeast. Here one can mention about the vicious circle of demands for *ethnic homelands* that saw its birth during the demands for reorganisation and continue to be reverberated across the region.

Apart from common language and culture, another criteria for formation of states was that these administrative units should be able to sustain themselves. However the economic viability of these newer states of the northeast was a cause of concern for the centre. Their mutual antagonism also needed to be regulated as inter-state border issues by their very nature are rarely conclusive.<sup>2</sup> But because of their geographical location these states were dependent on each other and any change in policies related to one state often had repercussions for other states. Their location which consisted of crucial international border also needed the presence of a central government agency to regulate the overall working of the region. Hence at this point the need for a body that would ensure co-ordination between the newly formed states to see to it that there is a dialogue between them with respect to policies was felt.

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<sup>1</sup> Sajal Nag “Linguistic Provinces’ to ‘Homelands’: Shifting Paradigms of State-Making in Post-colonial India”, pg 268

<sup>2</sup> Nagaland’s claims for parts of Assam and Manipur is a cause for constant disturbance in the region.

The North Eastern Council was envisaged to be such a body to rein in the regional assertions that pulled the region in different directions. It was put at the regional level to address the grievances of these newly formed states with respect to alienation and economic backwardness. There was discussion on either having a strong federal body at the regional level which would be in charge of a number of essential state subjects or having a mere dialogue platform where in case of issues that concern two or more states, in a scenario of clash of interest the states can come together and sort it out. The North Eastern Council was formed as a compromise between the two views. And it was aimed at bringing co-ordinated regional development with no overlapping costs. More about its role is discussed later in the paper.

### ***Ethnicity and Regional Development***

Coming to the second part of my paper, development does not take place in a vacuum. Politics plays a crucial role as developmental policies have target groups. The question of development has always been a contested one. In the context of regional disparity, development to be meaningful is bound to be mediated by regional politics. For example, because of fragile environmental condition, development in the Northeast must be sustainable in nature. And in Northeast diverse ethnic and linguistic groups exist side by side. There is often clash for scarce resources amongst the various communities. The question of development is also deeply intertwined with the issue of ethnic homeland. Development policies for Northeast to be meaningful must take this into account as even with huge economic packages and special funds for autonomous councils, the region continues to languish in economic backwardness. The entire reorganisation was backed by the conviction that development of a community is possible only in its homeland.

To rein in the negative impacts of fissiparous tendencies in the region, the NEC and later Ministry for Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER) was set up. Reports on the developmental lag of North east and underuse of resources point out that plans often fail to respond to the needs of the region in the planning level itself.<sup>3</sup> As opposed to the tendency of reducing problems to merely implementation level, these reports point out that there is a gap when the plans are formulated. The need and requirement of the region is not reflected in the

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<sup>3</sup> Nimmi Kurien and Jayashree Vivekanandan (2010)“ Exclusion in Resource Governance in India- The Northeastern States”, Working Paper for Centre for Policy Research, Delhi.

plans that are formulated. It was believed that a regional planning authority can close this gap by intervening at the formulation level itself.

In case of the Northeast because of experiences of alienation felt for long, who initiates a policy becomes more important than what is being initiated. The value of an economic policy should not be only its intrinsic worth but how it is formulated.<sup>4</sup> The beneficiaries should be an essential part of decision makers. Discourse on development should be generated in public spheres. In a civil society which is jettisoned between the state and its agenda of counter insurgency from above and the ethno-nationalist politics of identity assertion from below, there is very less space to put in place a viewpoint not mired by these two perspectives. In Northeast it is important to take into account what softening of borders or putting in place a transnational region would do to the ethnicity of the region. The most vulnerable groups are the tribals and development policies should not jeopardise their position.

Free markets also tend to undermine the protectionism expected by the ethnic tribes of the region. Time and again government committees have been critical of this kind of protectionism. They are of the opinion that people of the Northeast cannot expect to develop while remaining cocooned and isolated. They cannot lapse into localism.<sup>5</sup> Such committees have advocated opening up of the region with profit motive as the dominant criteria. But globalisation should be considered viable based on its distributive performance. Scholars are apprehensive if state should be the agency ushering in such changes. They would prefer civil society to provide the platform to different groups to engage and decide.<sup>6</sup> But in North East where a strong majority-minority dichotomy is at play, civil society may be hegemonised by the majority group at the cost of the minority group leading to further marginalisation of an already estranged group. The tribals are often the minority communities.

Focus in Northeast should be on synchronisation rather than centralisation. Scholars are also of the view that infrastructural development of the region is not adequate to enable it to compete profitably in terms of cross border trade. This renders them wary of initiatives like the Look East Policy which might turn the region into a mere transit point. Emphasis should be on a regional market ensuring free flow of goods and capital rather than cross border trade. The states should be linked with Assam in a better way. Economic integration of the region

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<sup>4</sup> Das, Samir Kumar "Looking East via the North East: The Ethnic Dimension".

<sup>5</sup> Shukla Commission Report.

<sup>6</sup> Das, Samir Kumar.

might help to mitigate political disintegration which the region suffers from. Only pumping of central fund and stamping of authority through big development projects will lead to dysfunctional development.<sup>7</sup> Any policy to be successful in the North East has to be embedded in the social, geographical and political reality of the region.

### ***NEC and Regional Development***

The formation of NEC is an ultimate example of regional politics finding manifestation in development process. This is where politics and development converge and engage in dialogue. Delhi was too distant to respond to the region's needs. This Council is a step towards decentralisation and providing more voice and autonomy to the region in terms of developmental policies. The Council was formed to dispose a number of crucial functions. Constant alienation and persistent underdevelopment were causes of grievances of the region. So this Council was formulated to address these issues through the following functions.

### ***Formulating developmental policies***

Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru in his Panchsheel<sup>8</sup> concerning the tribals, spelled out the government's attitude towards their development. He was opposed to any kind of imposed modernisation that would jeopardise the different and unique livelihoods of the people. However the policy of letting them to be on their own although save guarded their cultural uniqueness but it did not improve their economic condition much. Even at present the development levels of the states are different and varied as most of them came under the purview of planning very late. Assam benefitted from planning longer than the other states which were formed later. The North Eastern Council was formed to ensure a balanced regional development and thereby reduce inter-state disparity within the region. In its endeavour to achieve a role of an agency for integrated development of the region, the Council identified certain priority sectors such as power, transport, communication and health. Over the years, other sectors as agriculture and allied, manpower development, industry, science and technology etc have also become part of NEC's development efforts.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Chakraborty, Gorky "North East Vision 2020: A Reality Check".

<sup>8</sup> Mentioned in the foreword to the second edition of Elwin's book A Philosophy for NEFA in 1959, it states the following principles: people should develop along the line of their own genius, their rights to land to be respected, not too many outsiders should be there, no over administration rather work with their social institutions etc.

<sup>9</sup> Pallabi Borah(2009), "NEC and the Development Initiatives in the North East", *Dialogue*, Jan-March Vol 10 No 3.

The Council took a number of policy initiatives under different headings to ensure development of the region. However these initiatives failed to change much in the region. Development in the region is still over-determined by the security concerns of the centre. A developmental agency like NEC was put under a ministry overlooking law and order and internal security which is the Ministry of Home Affairs. It also initially had only governors and not even chief ministers as members. This spell out the top down approach of development initiated by NEC that undermine democratically elected governments.<sup>10</sup> It also shows the failure of the region to resist a paradigm of “securitized development” being put into place. The centre-periphery dichotomy unfolds here when policies with respect to the region has national security as the reference point. Post independence the Centre continued with the perspective of the British looking at the region as a mere source of raw materials and a market for ready manufactured products. After independence it became a buffer zone and frontier between India and its neighbours. As a result development from the very beginning worked within a very problematic and limited paradigm which reduced its capabilities.

### ***Interstate co-ordinating body***

The Northeast region is landlocked geographically. But unlike other landlocked Indian states, 80% of it is surrounded by international boundaries. This puts the region in a very sensitive geo-political spot and gives it a permanent prominent place in India’s security policies owing to hostile neighbours. This region is not only landlocked but internally locked as well.<sup>11</sup> The states are not easily accessible to each other because of physical infrastructure, Inner Line Permit etc. The internally locked nature of the region can be addressed by emphasising on better road and transport between the states.

The absence of easy access to neighbouring states worsens the sense of deprivation and alienation among the people. Still in policies roads connecting the region with neighbouring countries gain much more importance than inter-state roads. Example can be the enthusiasm shown about Stilwell Road that connects India to Burma. This has been aggravated because of government’s new initiatives like Look East Policy. Landlocked nature of the region in itself cannot be a cause of perennial underdevelopment as most European countries are also landlocked. But it is the internally locked nature of the region which

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<sup>10</sup> When NEC was formed, it was under Ministry of Home Affairs. It continued to be till the formation of DoNER in 2004.

<sup>11</sup> M S Prabhakara (2004), “Is North East really landlocked?”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 39 No 42.

hampers an integrated development of the region. This has to do more with the socio-political history of the region which have seen the hostility of one state towards another.<sup>12</sup>

Hence there is a gap between the states both in terms of physical and ideological connectivity. Historically it was between the hills and plains, but even now lack of proper initiative keeps this region as such that people of one state fail to relate to what is happening in neighbouring states despite the fact that it might impact their lives as well. In such a deadlock, the Council provides a platform to bridge some of this gap. The Council provides a platform at two levels:

*Firstly*, at the regional level it gives space to the states to come together and discuss about the issues that concern them. It is a platform to ensure inter-state dialogue.

*Secondly*, the Council also acts as a co-ordinating body between the centre and the region. The central institutions are made aware of the specific needs of the region through the NEC especially through its plans and other studies that it undertakes from time to time.

The Council provides a useful platform to point out how Central Government policies often bypass this region because of its physical differences from other regions of the country. The policy of Bharat Nirman and **Prime Minister's Gram Sadak Yojana** (PMGSY) provides roads for connecting areas with a population of 250 persons. But Arunachal Pradesh with a population density of 13 persons per square km will mostly be left out of this policy. Other states like Nagaland have also requested that the number be brought down to 100. Ministry of Rural Development must take into account the specificity of the region while formulating policies so that they are not left out of the benefits.

AFSPA which puts into place a strong army hold on the region was implemented on the entire region with a minimum discussion in Indian Parliament—barely three hours in Lok Sabha and four hours in Rajya Sabha. And it was passed despite the staunch opposition of some members. Such attitude towards a law which put in place a virtual military regime on the region hampering the lives of the civilians in every possible way shows how the Indian psyche view Northeast.<sup>13</sup> Incidents like fake encounters in Manipur, the rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama etc shows that by this act state violence was institutionalised in the

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<sup>12</sup> The inner line system put in place by British made most parts of the North East inaccessible for others.

<sup>13</sup> Konthoujam Indrakumar (2009) "Imagining the North East through Look East Policy: Towards a Contextual Understanding" in Thingjam Kishan Singh (ed.) *Look East Policy and India's North East: Polemics and Perspectives*, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi.



region. The impunity that army enjoys under this act has further alienated the people of the region. Such alienation led to discourses of “*internal colonialism*” within the intellectual community. Although securitisation ensured that state presence was high in the region, economic development took a back seat. The limited representation of the region in a majoritarian electoral democracy re-entrenched marginalisation. This Council was an attempt at deepening democracy. Its aim was to address the long term alienation of the region by giving it voice.

But the Council has failed to bring states to terms with each other on issues like the Ranganadi Project. While Arunachal insists on finishing the project, in Assam there is a huge opposition from civil society organisations pointing out the ill effects of this power project on Assam. Arunachal has the highest untapped power potential but an unchecked exploitation of this potential puts other states in the way of harm. States like Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim are signing Memorandum of Understanding with private players to undertake power projects bypassing the NEC.

### ***Regional Planning Body***

The idea of region can be traced back to the founder of human geography Vidal de Lablache’s magnum opus *Tableau del la Geographie de la France*. His notion of pays or region has a distinctive agriculture due to soil and water supply as well as economic specialisation.<sup>14</sup> The identification of the northeast as a region is primarily a geo-political accident bearing upon international development. Caught in between South Asia and South East Asia, with a population with mongoloid features the region does not relate ethnically and culturally to other parts of India. It is often regarded as the western part of South East Asia and the region finds more cultural affinity with countries like Myanmar, Thailand etc.

To bring planning closer to the people, NEC aims to integrate central planning with regional planning. With the amendment of 2002, NEC was made a statutory planning body for the north eastern region. Broadly the NEC plans have two components—one implemented by the constituent units directly and the other by central agencies and regional corporations sponsored by the NEC. Apart from the nature of the scheme, locational, technical and administrative reasons determine the agency for implementation.<sup>15</sup> NEC’s plans provide

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<sup>14</sup> Rafiul Ahmed and Prasenjit Biswas (2004), *Political Economy of Underdevelopment of North East India*, Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi.

<sup>15</sup> Manjula Dowerah Bhuyan.

valuable input to the Planning Commission regarding the specific needs of the region. Factors like a common resource base, comparable agro-climatic systems and similar environment make the North East a logical unit of regional planning. In the plans of NEC a common issue has been inadequate funding and a request to the Centre to increase the outlay.

Regional planning does not supplant state plans. They are directed at reducing disparities and avoiding infructuous inter-state competition. But there is always a tendency of overlapping as the heads of development is at times ambiguous. And if some heads are transferred out of state plans and dealt exclusively under regional plan that can ensure better implementation. But there is a contention that not enough resources are at the disposal of NEC to formulate regional plans efficiently. Mechanisms to involve NEC with other ministries in charge of implementing policies are not spelled out clearly leading to a lot of ambiguity in terms of its function.

Despite a will to fine tune planning to regional aspirations, with NEC planning continues to be technological and bureaucratic, hence rendering planning faulty again. It also assumes that the 8 states in the region are sub regions of the North East. But these states are anything but homogenous. NEC fails to recognize adequately the intra-regional, inter-state heterogeneity arising out of difference in physiography, demographic characteristics, inaccessibility and distance from the nodal point of the region.<sup>16</sup> The execution of the policies formulated on NEC's recommendations is outside its ambit. Instead of a supervisory body, it is an advisory body and reviews the policies from time to time. Most policies are left with the states to be implemented, as a result it is often delayed leading to time and cost overrun.

### ***Maintaining Law and Order***

This clause of putting such a responsibility on a body meant mainly for economic development of the region was criticised as it fitted with the larger policy framework of the central government of treating the region as a frontier and securitising it. This function of the Council was not taken up in a strong way as the Council did not have enough resources. But the amendment of 2002 more explicitly states its responsibility to review maintenance of security and public order of the region.

Such a demand on this body creates problems at the implementation level. In 2004 the Council was placed under DoNER from MHA. Hence DoNER is the administrative ministry

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<sup>16</sup> Rafiul Ahmed and Prasenjit Biswas.

for the Council. But DoNER has not been assigned any role in the sphere of security of the region. Also the Council may be burdened if there is no proper augmentation of its Secretariat. A lot of co-ordination is required between NEC, DoNER and MHA to carry on meaningful reviews of the security situation. While Shukla Commission report talked of doing away with this provision of security, the amendment brought it back to the centre stage. This pushes NEC back to the MHA. What is dangerous with such provision is that it re-entrenches the belief that development in the region is mediated by security concerns.

Emphasis on law and order solution for the region is problematic because it reduces all unrest as secessionist and needing to be stopped. The infamous bombing of Aizawl in 1966 by Indian Air Force still is fresh in the minds of the people.<sup>17</sup> The insurgency problem is made a scapegoat for all the deprivation of the region including misgovernance.<sup>18</sup> Putting in place a wrong solution in the form of counterinsurgency forecloses taking an account of other glaring problems. While there are not enough undertakings for generating employment in a large scale, putting continuous emphasis on the law and order aspect leads to a deep distrust about centre's attitude towards the region. There are allegations that to counter the insurgent groups which started with an ideology, the centre's intelligence bureau planted groups without any ideology to counter them.<sup>19</sup> The ever increasing number of insurgent outfits, some purely as extortionist bodies, puts a serious question on the counterinsurgency policies of the centre.

Diversity of the region is seen as a threat, something that needs to be corrected. Since the 1962 Chinese attack when the centre failed badly to thwart the attack and Nehru gave that infamous speech that his heart goes out to the people of Assam, his speech was misunderstood and the region was further alienated.<sup>20</sup> The region also felt that it was merely being used as a buffer area against China. Another problem of working within a security paradigm is Centre negotiates only with insurgent outfits and when they surrender, they are rewarded. This is setting a very wrong precedent that the government only talks to insurgent groups and it sidelines civil society and human rights groups. The only way to make the

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<sup>17</sup> 5 days after MNF under Laldenga declared independence, IAF attacked the capital city of Mizoram. Use of such force against a country's own citizens is unprecedented and it re-entrenches the step-motherly attitude of New Delhi towards the north east.

<sup>18</sup> Neelesh Mishra and Rahul Pandita (2010) *The Absent State: Insurgency as an Excuse of Misgovernance*, Hachette Book Group, USA.

<sup>19</sup> Walter Fernandes

<sup>20</sup> Sunil Nath, "Assam: the Secessionist Insurgency and the Freedom of Minds", accessed at [www.satp.org](http://www.satp.org). The people of the region felt that the Prime Minister has given up on them.

government take note is to take up arms. While the government goes to negotiating table with the likes of NSCN, Irom Sharmila continues her fast for the fourteenth year without the centre paying any heed.

### ***Providing Feedback Mechanism***

The Council when it was formed was aimed to ensure the people of the region that the centre was concerned for the development of this excluded region and also to bring planning which is essentially a top down process closer to the people. This Council was aimed to give voice to the region. As policies formulated far off in Delhi seemed to alienate the people of the region, this Council is to act as feedback machinery to channelize the specific needs and demands of the region to the centre. This the Council does through its regional plans and yearly meetings. Such a feedback mechanism is important because a number of changes is taking place in the policy scenario with respect to the region. But in most cases the stakeholders are bypassed when it comes to formulating plans. Plans continue to be made based on guidelines given from above without taking into account the ground realities. Even with decentralisation of planning, the regional plans are merely dovetailed to fit into the framework set far away in Delhi. Decentralisation seems to be merely cosmetic. Even the feedback mechanism fails to deliver anything in actuality. Most concerns of the states are often bypassed by the centre while formulating policies.

### ***Conclusion***

The region is besotted with problems. Ethnic clashes, insurgency movements, human rights violation, inter-state clashes and persistent underdevelopment are the prominent ones. While the region has gained political importance as shown by the formation of a Ministry mainly to cater to the region, the recurring conflicts point to the absence of any permanent peace in the region. The solutions from government have been very cosmetic in nature. The NEC which had a lot of potential is a mere advisory body with not much real power. It was mainly used as a tool of pacifying a region. As a result it fails to end deadlocks between states. States continue to give primary importance to their needs bypassing its regional impact. The absence of dialogue within the states stands as a stumbling block for a smooth development process. While big dams are seen as detrimental to the region, there is no mechanism to negotiate regarding available possible alternatives. The region continues to be bereft of democratic spaces. Money flooding in fails to initiate institution building and stops short of making any real changes. The loudest voices are those of declaring faulty govt

policies and those opposing them tooth and nail. A middle way continues to be elusive. And the Northeastern Council which was supposed to provide for a compromise between the requirements of the region and the need for development has failed on multiple fronts because it has been denied of actual powers.

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