

**NORTH EASTERN COUNCIL AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF
THE REGION OF NORTHEAST**

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DECLARATION

This is to declare that the dissertation entitled "North Eastern Council and the Development of the Region of Northeast" submitted by me in partial fulfilment for the award of Master of Philosophy is my original work and has not been submitted for the award of any degree to this or any other University.

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Abbreviations:

- AAI -- Airport Authority of India
- AASU -- All Assam Students' Union
- ADC -- Autonomous District Councils
- AFSPA -- Armed Forces' Special Power Act
- AIBP -- Accelerated Irrigation Benefit Programme
- APCC -- Assam Pradesh Congress Committee
- APHLC -- All Party Hill Leaders' Conference
- ASEAN -- Association of South East Asian Nations
- EITU -- Eastern India Tribal's Union
- HDI -- Human Development Index
- IDP -- Internally Displaced People
- IMF -- International Monetary Fund
- KMSS -- Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti.
- LEP -- Look East Policy
- MDoNER -- Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region
- MHA -- Ministry of Home Affairs
- MNF -- Mizo National Front
- MSME -- Micro, Small and Medium Enterprise
- NEC -- North Eastern Council
- NEEPCO -- North Eastern Electric Power Corporation Limited
- NEFA -- North East Frontier Agency
- NEHHDC -- North Eastern Handlooms and Handicrafts Development Corporation

NEIIPP -- North East Industrial and Investment Promotion Policy

NERAMAC -- North Eastern Regional Agricultural Marketing Corporation

NERIST -- North Eastern Regional Institute of Science and Technology

NHDC -- Naga Hill District Council

NIPFP -- National Institute of Public Finance and Policy

NNC -- Naga National Council

NSCN -- National Socialist Council of Nagaland

NSDP -- Net State Domestic Product

PMGSY -- Prime Minister's Gram Sadak Yojana

PRI -- Panchayati Raj Institutions

RIMS -- Regional Institute of Medical Science

RRE -- Renewable Resources of Energy

SAARC -- South Asian Association of Regional Co-operation

SEZ -- Special Economic Zones

SPINE -- Scheme for Promotion of Industrialisation in the Northeast

SRC -- State Reorganisation Committee

ULFA -- United Liberation Front of Assam

Introduction

Narratives on the Northeastern region have pointed out the multiple ways in which the region has been excluded. They revolve around questions of “othering” and “alienation” that the region suffered from. To give a brief background—the Northeast was never a part of the Mughal Empire. It was brought under British Empire only in 1826 under the *Treaty of Yandaboo* that ended the Anglo-Burmese war. And after independence it became a part of India. Manipur, Tripura were princely states that were acceded to the Indian Union. Historically the Northeast has been conceived as a frontier region defined completely in terms of security.¹ Persistent underdevelopment of the region has led to the continuation of low intensity conflict. The region is marked by a tardy rate of growth and development. Scholars writing within the dependency theory school points out that the region is treated as an internal colony.² Northeast after six decades of independence continues to be a raw material producing region with no strong industrial presence.

As pointed out by Sanjib Baruah, since independence a constant quest has been *nationalising space* in the Northeast and using this land frontier as a tool of nation building. This was taken up because this space is culturally very different from mainland India. Apparent is *Sanskritized* names of states like *Arunachal Pradesh* and *Meghalaya*. This has also been done by taking Northeast in the fold of mainstream *developmentalism* whereby development and underdevelopment gets constituted discursively and objective material conditions of the region take a back seat. The region is marked by underdevelopment and violence.

The agitators of Assam Movement point out that the royalty that Assam gets for tea, oil is a little more than rent.³ Trade and commerce was dominated by business communities from outside the state like the Marwars of Rajasthan. The people of the region felt disadvantaged. Even the kind of developmental policies that the Central Govt made in New Delhi failed to address the specific needs of the region. Policies for

¹Sanjib Baruah(1999), *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Pennsylvania.

² Rafiul Ahmed and Prasenjit Biswas (2004), *Political Economy of Underdevelopment of the North East India*, Akanksha Publishing House, New Delhi.

³ This Socio-political movement started in 1979 against outsiders entering the state and for greater royalty from state's produce like tea, rubber, petroleum etc.

development in the Northeast should be made at the regional level by people who know the region and by taking cognisance of the ground reality of Northeast. At present some central government policies regarding building roads is meant to connect areas with a population of 250 or more. But such a policy leaves out a huge no of villages of Arunachal Pradesh which is sparsely populated and has a lower density.

There was a clear gap between the need of the region and what came from the centre. To counter the alienation that the region feels, the centre has undertaken a number of initiatives. To curb insurgency the solution has been stringent militaristic rules in the form of AFSPA which has been in place for a few decades in the region. It gives virtually unlimited power to the Army to kill without holding them accountable. Also it has put in place a Military Command structure called the *Unified Command* which puts the Army under the control of the Centre. And to tackle the persistent underdevelopment financial packages have been made available to the region. But despite these initiatives, low intensity conflict continued in the region. Because of the persistent underdevelopment and unemployment it was always very easy for the militant groups to recruit new members.

To mitigate the alienation and exclusion that the region has suffered from, the government has initiated a number of policies. Noteworthy among them are the institutions put in place to work specifically for the development of the region. The North Eastern Council was established in 1971 under North Eastern Council Act 1971. It started functioning in 1972. But despite such initiatives the region continues to languish behind the rest of the country. This point to the need to relook at the initiatives to understand where the shortcomings are. Is the problem at implementation of policy or the mechanism which is at place to formulate the policies? To understand this, I want to look at closely at one such institution which was formed mainly for the development of the Northeast. It is the North Eastern Council. I want to study what it has done for the region and how it has impacted the development process in the region.

This Council formulates policies and regional plans for the development of the region. This process needs to be studied. Planning is often reduced to a technical process minus any political underpinnings. Partha Chatterjee states that a divorce between planning and politics in case of India put in place a gap between aspirations of

people from planning and what planning actually delivered. Problems are reduced to technical anomalies and solutions reduced to efficient technical initiatives of institutions. There is a need to also study the sociological aspects of institutions that take up planning and how they interact with the demands made on it. Institutions are the face of the state to people. A state's role can be understood by looking at how institutions function. But should institutions be understood as mere repetitive behaviour that influences political processes or as rules that are a result of political processes.⁴ According to Iris Marion Young and a number of other radical democrats, a particular design of institution, in this case a deliberative mechanism, can go a long way in shaping mobilisation and combating exclusion which is an ill of representative democracy. Institutions by their very logic point to certain embedded values and are resilient. Hence there is an inherent tendency in institutions to exclude those elements which tend to question these embedded values. To make institutions inclusive its design needs to be worked upon.

A state also tries to enforce particular values through its institutions which have a tendency to have a closure from new information in order to avoid undergoing change. This may exclude certain groups. Inclusive institutions are important for a democracy in order to put in place an idea of equal citizenship. The institutions put in place in the Northeast especially needs to be inclusive. There is a need to move away from looking at the Northeast as a mere frontier. Northeast cannot be treated as an internal colony. Northeast after 6 decades of independence continues to be a raw material producing region and a market for finished products. Policy making in the Northeast was turned into a theatre.⁵ If the problem is confined merely to implementation level quoting siphoning of money by militants and corrupt local govts, there is a risk of reducing the problems to administrative issues and not political ones. So there is a need to go back to policy formulation level and examine how far they have responded to the requirements of the region. Policy formulation deals with how the centre views the region and its needs. A study of the Council will help to understand if there are problems at the formulating level itself.

⁴ R.A.W Rhodes, Sarah A. Binder and Bert A Rockman (ed.) (2006), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Institutions*, OUP, New York.

⁵ Hiren Gohain(2006), "Governance as Theatre", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30 Sept.

Literature Review

Question of development in the Northeast is closely intertwined with question of security and identity. The ethnic movements have often emphasised on exploitation and marginalisation of the people. I want to study the Council keeping in mind larger questions like development and inclusion of the region. A brief literature review covers works which deals with this kind of issues which interconnects questions of development, security and identity in the region. The region before re-organisation comprised of the state of Assam. So some books discussed here tries to trace the present problems of the region to the history of Assam.

Amalendu Guha in his seminal work *Planter Raj to Swaraj* deals with questions of how Assam was developed since it was under the British control. The region was essentially developed as a plantation economy. A minimal development took place in Assam mainly because of Britain's interest in tea plantations. The book maps the trajectory of freedom movement in Assam and the growth of a national liberal consciousness. The Assamese intervention was mediated mainly through linguistic conflicts. However the development put in place was lopsided from the very beginning. A very small and weak bourgeoisie rose out of this development which depended on feudal interests and foreign capital. The development discourse was overdetermined by the need of the Planters. The Assamese tea plantation owners like Maniram Dewan rose against the British only after their feudal interests were hampered. Assam was developed as a plantation economy. This book looks into the imperialism of opium cultivation, the problems of a steady influx of immigrants which saw a backlash in the form of a local linguistic chauvinism. This book tries to trace the reasons of present socio-political situation of the region in the history of undivided Assam.

Monirul Hussain in *Interrogating Development: State, Displacement and Popular Resistance in North East India* looks at the nature of development in the region. Development in the Northeast is lopsided. The marginalised sections continue to be victims of such developmentalism. The rate of Internal Displacement is high. Amongst the *Internally Displaced People* (IDPs), 40-50% is Tribals. The region is like a periphery within periphery. It is far from the Centre and dependent on it. Hussain looks at state sponsored developmental projects in the region. The IDPs created by these

projects especially mega dams are worse off than refugees as they are left outside the regime of protection which covers the refugees. Amongst these doubly marginalised groups, the level of disillusionment and disempowerment is high. These mega dams are being questioned by the people. Dams like Subansiri, Pagladiya, Tipaimukh is facing a resistance from the people of the region. Such resistance questions the policy framework that the Centre uses for the region. While power projects mark modernisation, if it leaves people displaced then there is a reason to rethink the benefits of such projects.

Samir Kumar Das in *Blisters on Their Feet* also looks at the IDPs. It is a compendium of case studies of IDPs in the Northeastern states. It looks at Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Tripura and Manipur. There is a hierarchy of IDP victims- one group is pitted against another. Ethnic identity of the group becomes important. But ethnic identity of a victim does not justify victimhood. The region saw violent movements for homeland riding on the belief that communities can feel secured and can develop only in homelands. The major causes of displacement in the region are development and conflict. For Das problematic is not the model of development but its uneven impact. It benefits some and victimises others. Because of this many groups came together to oppose projects like Tipaimukh. Groups like Zeliangrong Nagas and Assamese came on common platform to oppose the Tipaimukh dam. Das states that for some displacement is an essential impact of development while for others there is nothing wrong in development induced displacement per se. He contends that one needs to go back to primitive accumulation of Marx. Dispossession in the Northeast which had community owned land need to be understood differently. Development should not bypass such questions.

Sanjib Baruah in his books lay down important frameworks to understand the Centre's psyche towards the region. In *Durable Disorder* and *India against Itself*, he points out to how the region is treated by the centre. While in *India against Itself* he tries to trace the historical linkages of the present state of issues, in *Durable Disorder* he continues with what the centre did after independence. Even after 1947 there is a continuation of treating the region like a frontier. This region is used for nationalising space. Development followed here is of an imposed nature. The Northeast has always

been seen through the prism of security. According to Baruah, two dominant issues in the region are immigration and persistent underdevelopment. The language issue also led to marginalisation. It had polarising effect in the region. Language became a marker of development.

Outsiders were dominant in the economy of the state. The Inner Line System crystallised differences amongst the hills and the plains but failed to account for interactions between Nagas and Ahoms. Politics of differentiation replaced politics of accommodation. There were fissures between Assamese and other plains tribes. Safeguarding Assamese might have been at their cost. Along with these, Baruah points out how centre is obsessed with securitising the region. The Governors of the states are mostly ex-generals of Army. The development in the region is mediated by security concerns. Quoting insurgency as the reason for underdevelopment, centre puts in place counterinsurgency policies. But this in turn leads to militarisation of the society where human rights violation takes place on a regular basis.

Jayeeta Sharma in her *Empire's Garden: Assam and the Making of India*, talks of how Assam's economy was shaped since the imperial days as mainly a plantations' economy. Assam became important to the British only after the discovery of tea. British portrayed Assamese as a lazy people addicted to home grown opium. Local elites who went to Calcutta for education came in contact with western values. This interaction contributed to the formation of Assamese cultural consciousness. Local elites associated more with Indic Aryans than with the aboriginals of the Northeast. Initially Assamese landed elite expressed faith in the transformative capacities of tea enterprise. But tea enterprise later consolidated as a predominantly white enterprise. It was elemental in initiating the process of othering. And the local elites realised that the British will not safeguard their interests. The British developed the state mainly to serve their purpose leading to uneven development.

Sharma in her book talks in detail of the creation of an imperial tea garden. Coolies working in the tea gardens were treated as 'the outsider' by the local people as the British looking for cheap labour brought them from other parts of the country. Under British rule there were important cultural shifts marked by varied power struggles. Service gentry of Ahom could be co-opted by the British regime. A newly

standardised vernacular language emerged as a marker of a modernized Assamese identity. The process of nation making of Assam was carried on by a number of social movements. These movements often became exclusive and looked like chauvinistic at times because it banked highly on questions of identity. These movements also tried to address the exploitation that the region suffered from its days as a plantation economy.

Sanjib Baruah in his edited volume *Beyond Counterinsurgency*, covers a number of writings that point out that the Northeast question is heavily overdetermined by security issues. In case of development there is a wide gap between the power holders and the stake holders. The dominant concern is national security. Nation making is not seen as a process but a finalised done deal. Development in the Northeast is externally delivered economic packages which can be illegally transferred into hard cash. This often leaks into the hands of insurgent outfits. This money is used to sponsor insurgency movements in the region. The book as its title suggests emphasises on a need to move away from counterinsurgency solutions for the region.

Sajal Nag in *Contesting Marginality: Ethnicity, Insurgency and Sub-nationalism in North East India*, states that the reason for chronic insurgency in the region is the deeply entrenched marginalisation which is not restricted to government policies only. It is there in historiography also. He looks into the identity issue of Nagas, Mizos and Meiteis. Disruptions created identity crisis in these tribes. These communities tried to handle subjection under Indian state by asserting nationhood. He describes the complex process of accession and the rise of insurgent groups. He also traces the shifts in these insurgent groups- from ideal based to those inflicting rudderless violence. However he overlooked the insurgency of other smaller groups and he clubbed a plains tribe Meitei with hill tribes while at times the plains tribes and hill tribes are pitted against each other. The concerns of such tribes are different and this difference needs to be acknowledged.

In Archana Upadhyay's *India's Fragile Borderlands*, focus is on "political terrorism". She talks of systematic use of murder and destruction to force people to concede to terrorist aims. For her every insurgent group at some point of time indulge in terrorising activities. This take seems like reductionist as it fails to appreciate the issues thrown up by the various insurgent groups. Talks of only ethnic terrorism overlook the

non-violent movements in the region. But such an understanding also brings forth the issue that there is a tendency of the central govt to engage only with insurgent groups because they freely indulge in violence. As a solution, Upadhyay wants a regional security network but she fell short of mentioning the need to put in place inclusive governance to ensure democratisation. The solution is very much within the security paradigm.

Writing within a framework of Dependency Theory, Rafiul Ahmed and Prasenjit Biswas in *Political Economy of Underdevelopment of North-East India*, explore the idea of neo-dependency which gives relative autonomy to sub-peripheries and at the same time ensures surplus extraction. The British policy of exclusion in the Northeast curbed the influence of mainstream political movements and kept many parts of it outside the ambit of national movement and the formation of national consciousness. Guha's Planter Raj to Swaraj showed surplus accumulation putting in place a pre-capitalist mode of exploitation of labour. There is a spatial aspect to distribution of developmental benefits. Northeast was developed as a hinterland in colonial times. Market forces undermined the tribal culture. Land and agriculture was commercialised. Tribal land and labour were both available for sale. Modes of production is peripheral and dependent. People living in the Northeast are controlled by bureaucrats and politicians staying in Delhi. The Northeast was developed as a tea producing region. Commercialisation displaced local aspirations. Over the years the attitude towards developing the region did not change. Even now most plantations are owned by outsiders and controlled from London and Calcutta.

Bimal J Deb's edited volume *Regional Development in North East India- Issues and Prospects* brings into the regional perspective to situate the region in terms of development. It also tries to mention some pragmatic policy solutions to address the persistent backwardness of the region. A few reasons for the backwardness of the Northeast are failure to take into account the specific socio-economic condition of a large number of ethnic groups, the backward effects of developmental process followed by the Indian state, the underutilisation and the misutilisation of resource of regional resource base and the inability of people to evolve an alternative model of development. To ensure development of the region, there is a need to address these basic problems.

Dr A. K. Agarwal in *Economic Problems and Planning in North East India*, deals in great details with the diverse economies of the seven different states. He has included issues of economic structure, agriculture, development and problems of banking and development of the region. The author did not leave any facet untouched in his book.

Rakhee Bhattacharya in her book *Development Disparity in North East India*, starts with the geo-strategic location of the region and the need for special initiatives. She looks at the possibilities of developments and the factors that hindered it. She looks at the pre and post reform periods. The term development must cover institutional and structural changes. The disparity in the region is studied vis-a-vis the Indian mainland in the book. In the post reform period inequality has increased in India. The persistent backwardness despite of economic packages is because of institutional failure, improper policy and politics etc. But owing to lack of absorptive capacity in the region, these funds are often leaked and end up in sponsoring parallel governments in the region. This impedes the economic growth and development of the region. The solution according to the author must come from within the region with an honest participation of the people. The government's policies have not been successful and the region has been synonymous with insurgency and violence. Stability, peace and security are the pre-conditions for sustainable development which the Northeastern region have not had.

Hans Peter Brunner's *North East India: Local Economic Development and Global Markets* is a collection of essays analysing the economic situation of the region. The book points out a number of reasons for this economic distress- crucial being partition, weak infrastructure, poor access to markets etc. But a major reason is the paradigm of development and the debates on relations between development and insurgency. As the region has an agro based economy, there is a need to improve industrial and agricultural efficiencies. But for that according to Brunner there is a need to boost up investment, both public and private. The region should diversify its product base to make itself commercially viable. There is also a need to change the image of the Northeast in popular minds as being an unstable place.

B. G. Verghese in *India's North East Resurgent*, states of how the mainland views the region. For the mainland the Northeast is sporadic news reports mainly talking of violent outbursts. The developmentalism imposed on the region worsened its

already pitiable condition. Such developmentalism is insensitive. As the region is reeked by insurgent movements the way out is peaceful dialogue. He hopes that a cultural and functional unity is possible between the Manipur and Nagaland on the Greater Nagaland issue. The immigration issue does not find adequate focus in his work. One way out of the problems in the region is to put in place some interesting solutions like close interaction with the neighbouring countries. To solve the power problem in the region, he feels that a transcontinental power grid will help. However this may not seem politically pragmatic as it requires a highly co-ordinated approach from all the neighbouring countries.

Subir Bhoumik in *Troubled Periphery: Crisis in India's North East*, points out to the tendency of the centre to overlook certain basic facts of the region. The people of the region feel anger at being let down by government at different levels. The region is lagging behind not only in terms of development but human development also. Displacement is rendering people who are already marginalised in greater distress. But the centre's policies mostly bypass these important issues.

Looking Back into the Future: Identity and Insurgency in Northeast India is a collection of the dispatches of M. S. Prabhakara written over the last few decades from the Northeast. The region is often perceived as full of complexities. Being a site where multiple ethnic identities reside, it comes up as multilayered. But there is a lack of understanding. Prabhakara through his pieces try to simplify this complexity. He talks of a number of issues. He takes up the language issue. He engages with the heirarchies between scripts. The book deals with a number of issues like the question of autonomy, the demands for scheduled status, the ethnic clashes etc. Although a number of articles were written in an earlier period of time and may not seem relevant, they still provide good insights on the issues that the region continues to grapple with.

Sanghamitra Misra's *Becoming a Borderland: The Politics of Space and Identity in the colonial Northeastern India* is written within the Post-Colonial Deconstructionist framework. She used both conventional and unconventional sources of history. Her study is based on a low profile district called Goalpara which had historical linkages with countries like Tibet, Bengal, Cooch Behar and Assam. It deals with the politics of space in colonial Assam. But it goes back to the Mughal period and talks of state

formation under their rule. It focuses on peasantisation. It looks into economic changes and land settlements. It looks at the cultural reproduction of a borderland identity marked by a hyphenated existence between Bengal and Assam. This area is also a site of contention because of being home to Bengali speakers. This is where the Assamese and Bengali identity intersects.

Manjula Dowerah Bhuyan in her *The North Eastern Council*, looked at the Council's function in dominant sectors like Agriculture, Industries and Manpower in the light of five year plans of the government. It is a time bound study which looks at the Council's function till the eight five year plan which ended in 1997. It gives a detailed account of the kind of policies that the Council undertook in this period.

Hence, the books mentioned above look at issues of development, security and ethnicity in the region. These issues are interconnected. The question of development cannot be studied in isolation without taking into account the unrest that the region suffers from. Few dominant trends that can be discerned in the above literature is how the centre views the region, how it views the problems that the region is facing and what kind of solutions can be offered. Insurgency is seen as a reason why investment shies away from the region leading to a lower level of development. Most books talk about the different kinds of possible solutions. While there needs to be institutional changes to ensure development, there is also a need to question the framework within which the region and its problems are perceived.

Research Gap

The Government of India tried to address the problems of the region with a number of initiatives mainly as counterinsurgency related policies and financial packages. In 1971 the North Eastern Council Act was passed which put in place a regional planning and developmental body called the North Eastern Council. The Ministry of Development of the North Eastern region was set up as an independent Ministry in 2004 to look into the development of the region. Such initiative shows greater political attention to the region. But there is not enough work done on these initiatives of the government. Dowerah's book is a time bound study which looks at the Council for the period of 1972-1997. The Council's role underwent crucial changes

after the amendment of 2002, the formation of DoNER Ministry and with newer initiatives of the centre like the Look East Policy. There is no work done on the Council's role keeping in mind these questions.

Objectives of the study

- a) To understand policy making process of NEC in terms of mechanisms of decision-making and role of political actors.
- b) To understand the level of participation of the region in policy making as an active interlocutor facilitated by the Council.
- c) To evaluate the region's representation in the institution in terms of policy initiatives earmarked for each of the states.
- d) To study how far the Council has ensured inclusive governance in the region.
- e) To assess its impact on the region.

The study looks at the problem of making essential linkages between increased economic funding and development of the region. Do financial packages sideline the need to study if there is any bias in the policies regarding the region? It assesses the kind of solutions that usually come up to address underdevelopment like the kind of policy initiatives. Is there a tendency to reduce the problems to something technical like problem at the level of implementation? Such understanding will bypass looking at the problems that exist at the formulation level.

Methodology

The North Eastern Council should be studied in context of larger questions of development of the region. It is examined through an analysis of secondary material which lays down the discourse on development of the region. Scholarly works on the Northeast have tried to look into the reasons of persistent underdevelopment of the region and the ways to solve it. Scholars have looked at the limitations of government initiatives. Using such framework this study looks at the working of the Council. It also uses primary material like government reports and reports published by NEC to look into the policies undertaken by the Council. This study is not restricted only to the functions of the Council, but it takes the Council also as an unit of analysis and studies the Council in terms of its structure and composition.

Chapterisation

The first chapter will look at the backdrop of the formation of the Council. This chapter will try to take an account of what led to the formation of the Council. Important events that led to the formation of the NEC are the first reorganisation of the country broadly on linguistic basis, the language movement in Assam and the second reorganisation of the Northeastern region. The second chapter will look at the role and function of the Council in the development of the region. The chapter will look into the initiatives of the Council in terms of policies and funding of projects. The NEC initiates policies under a number of headings which can contribute to the development of the region. This chapter will take an account of what the NEC has done for the region and its role in the all round development of the region. The third chapter will be an assessment of the Council's role in the development of the region and in the light of putting in place a greater amount of decentralisation and devolution in power. The Council is entrusted with serving a number of purpose like giving a voice to the region in terms of formulating policies. How the Council performs with regard to these will also be taken up in the third chapter. I will conclude with summarising in brief what this Council as a planning and developmental agency means for the region.

Chapter 1

Reorganisation of the Northeastern Region and the Formation of North Eastern Council

This chapter will look at the events and developments in the post-independence era that led to the formation of the North Eastern Council (NEC). The important developments that acted as a catalyst for the formation of this Council are the first reorganisation of the Indian states in 1956 and its failure to accommodate the aspirations of the tribal population of the region, the coming to centre stage of the language issue in Assam leading to a tussle between Bengali and Assamese on one hand, and smaller linguistic groups and Assamese on the other. These conflicts led to the second reorganisation of states in 1971 and formation of a number of smaller states in the Northeast. This reorganisation formed the immediate backdrop for the Council's formation. Although the region was carved into a number of newer states, the NEC was entrusted with regional development of the Northeast and ensuring some kind of continued co-ordination between the different parts of the erstwhile state of Assam.

The newly independent Indian state had reservations against linguistic reorganisation immediately after partition. With the backdrop of a difficult partition any reorganisation might have seemed risking the unity of a fragile young nation. This reservation was manifested in the reports of Linguistic Provinces Commission (1948) led by S K Dar. This Commission wanted the reorganisation of Madras, Bombay and Central Provinces and Berar primarily on the basis of geographical contiguity, financial self sufficiency, and ease of administration. Language did not feature prominently in their considerations. To study the recommendations of this Commission, the Congress in its Jaipur Session of 1948 set up the high powered JVP Committee comprising of Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel and Pattabhi Sitaramaiyya. The Dar Commission and the JVP Committee in 1948 endorsed the view that reorganisation for the time being should be shelved as it had the potential to destabilise the newly independent country. The high powered JVP Committee allowed only for the reorganisation of Andhra Pradesh but on the condition that they give up their claims on Madras.

The demand for reorganisation of Andhra for Telugu speaking people was backed by a long drawn popular movement which saw its peak when Potti Sreeramalu, a freedom fighter fasted till death in 1952. It was in October, 1953 that Andhra Pradesh came into existence and this set the ball rolling. After that the Indian state had to undertake reorganisation of states. With the formation of Andhra the government could not stall the question of reorganisation any more. To study the feasibility of reorganisation the State Reorganisation Committee was formed in 1953 consisting of Fazal Ali, Kavalam Madhava Panikkar and H.N Kunzru. It submitted its report in 1955 and some of its recommendations were implemented by the Central government in the reorganisation of states in 1956.

Linguistic Reorganisation of States

Linguistic reorganisation found its first mention in a letter of Herbert Risley,¹ Home Secretary, Government of India to the Government of Bengal in 1903 in which the proposal of partition of Bengal was first mooted. However in Bengal's partition the linguistic affinity was violated and Hindus and Muslims who were bound by a common language Bengali were divided on communal lines. Linguistic provinces were endorsed by Congress and since 1920 Provincial Congress Committees were set up on this basis. This rendered linguistic reorganisation a level of legitimacy. Congress reaffirmed its adherence to linguistic principles on three more occasions between 1928 and 1947—at Calcutta Session in October 1937, at Wardha in 1938 and in their election manifesto of 1945-1946.²

After independence, with the question of linguistic reorganisation no longer to be stalled, the SRC headed by Justice Fazal Ali undertook an extensive account of the feasibility of linguistic reorganisation. They invited response to the idea of linguistic reorganisation in the form of memorandums and interviews and gave their recommendations in 1955. The overarching principle that the Committee followed was the *stability, national unity and security* of the nation state. As a result the subtext of the report was strongly concerned with security and unity of the nation. While the

¹ Sajal Nag (2011), "'Linguistic Provinces' to 'Homelands': Shifting Paradigms of State-Making in Post-colonial India," p. 254 in Sudha Pai, Asha Sarangi edited *Interrogating Reorganisation of States: Culture, Identity and Politics in India*, Routedledge, New Delhi.

² *Ibid* p. 254

committee conceded that linguistic affiliation can be an important parameter because it corresponds to distinct cultures and hence will provide common character to an area rendering administration efficient and smooth, linguistic fanaticism was to be checked. So exclusive linguistic homelands were seen as units having the potential to impact national unity in an adverse way. Along with the criteria of language, economic viability to ensure maintenance and growth in the states in order to cover non plan expenditure was proposed to be the guiding criteria of reorganisation.³ Hence broadly the SRC Report stated that larger states are to be preferred to smaller ones as they are stable as well as economically viable. States should be able to survive as viable administrative units on their own. The Committee was flooded with a huge number of demands for new states. It looked into many of the demands like the ones for reorganising specific states like Madras, Assam etc.

In chapter 16 of the Report the issue of reorganisation of the state of Assam is discussed. In case of Assam, despite strong demands for reorganisation the Committee endorsed the status quo and preferred no change to the state's territorial make up. While the government of Assam headed by Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi was in favour of status quo, Assam would have welcomed a merger with Cooch Behar, Manipur, Tripura, and a closer connection with North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) which was with Assam but administered separately by the Centre.⁴ West Bengal made claims for the Goalpara district of Assam owing to the presence of a large number of Bengali speaking people.⁵ Hill tribal leaders in 1954 demanded a separate Hill State citing discrimination by the dominant plains people and political leaders. There was a demand for a separate Kamatapur state comprising of Goalpara, Cooch Behar, Garo Hills, Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri.⁶ There was also a demand for a separate state of Purbachal consisting of the area around Cachar. The Nagas continued to demand the right to secede from Assam and Indian Union and retain Independence.

In the midst of such demands the sub-committee of the Constituent Assembly on North East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas popularly known as the

³ Viability of states was 2 pronged – maintenance and growth of the state's economy.

⁴ Although post independence NEFA was constitutionally part of Assam, it was directly administered by the President Deputy Commissioner and then through an Agency council for better governance.

⁵ State Reorganisation Report, 1955, Government of India, p. 183.

⁶ Ibid, p. 184.

Bordoloi Committee headed by Gopinath Bordoloi stated in 1947 that the Naga demand for a separate state was not feasible. The Committee recommended autonomous councils or district councils for hill areas in 1952.⁷ But this arrangement was not accepted by the Nagas. Apart from this a large number of demands ranging from quasi independent status to cultural autonomy of the districts were presented to the subcommittee. The subcommittee's report rejected these various alternatives either directly or by implication by maintaining the non-feasibility of autonomy within Assam. Giving voice to the sentiment of mainstream Assamese people of plains, the demand for a separate hill state was seen as a separatist pull of the extremist elements.⁸ Their demand for separation was seen as a colonial hangover of the *Inner Line System* which put in place a system of segregating hill people from their plains' counterparts. The new state of Assam was to include all the existing areas along with Tripura and Manipur which were princely kingdoms. The hill districts were to continue to be a part of Assam. As compensation there was a provision for the hill districts to have autonomous bodies for administrative purpose and a separate commissioner. But these autonomous district councils were not functioning well and hence a Commission called the Pataskar Commission was formed to look into the matter.⁹

Therefore the first state reorganisation did not change much for Assam. The Report for the rest of India preferred composite states comprising diverse ethnic and linguistic groups as opposed to unilingual states which may be exclusive.¹⁰ The SRC report settled for reorganisation of states broadly on linguistic lines. When it came to the Northeast, the SRC opposed the demand for multilingual composite states. This demand was raised in the form of the Hill State where people of different and smaller ethnic and linguistic groups would have lived. SRC feared that creating a hill state would pave the

⁷ Keeping in mind the level of development in tribal areas, this Committee mentioned a plan of dividing the tribal areas in to areas where district councils can be set up (Part A) and areas which has to be left in the discretionary power of the Governor with regard to administration (Part B).

⁸ In heated debates in the Assembly, Kuladhar Chaliha of Assam stated that such provisions will be divisive and hills need to be assimilated with the plains and said provisions like Sixth Schedule will lead to balkanization of the region and creation of *Tribalists*.

⁹ The councils had a disadvantage from the very beginning as they failed to satisfy the demand of the hill leaders. They also suffered from being given very minimal powers, hence rendering them less efficient.

¹⁰ The SRC described composite states as those which make adequate provision for protection of local culture and language and no political values and social attitudes should be accepted at the state level.

way for demands of homelands on narrower ethnic lines.¹¹ What SRC did in 1956 left 45% people as linguistic minorities in the state.

The irony however is as opposed to what the report suggested, while the rest of the country was reorganised largely on linguistic lines, the report's approach to the Northeast paved way for the further fragmentation of the region. A hill state was to comprise of the hill districts of Assam which are mentioned in Part A of the table appended to the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.¹² Although the demand hoped to include the Naga Hills, the Naga Nationalist Council which sought independence from the Indian state remained aloof from this demand.¹³ This demand for hill state was aimed to ensure mutual co-existence between a number of ethnic and linguistic groups. The tribal leaders thought such an arrangement could work as the hill districts shared a similar level of backwardness and alienation. The polarisation was between the hill and the plains people. Rather the report suggested that the hill districts should continue to be part of Assam and have some level of autonomy under District Councils provided in the Sixth Schedule. This not only polarised the hill and plains people, but within the hills also it sowed the seeds for demand of smaller ethnic homelands. The cosmetic unity which was imposed on the Northeast was aimed to suppress the demands for newer states or any more reorganisation of the region. Rather the assumption was that the idea of limited autonomy would pacify the tribal leaders. But the flimsy unity was disturbed by the language issue of the 1960s.

The Language Movement in Assam

With no reorganisation of the Northeastern Region which left the tribal leaders disappointed, the demands for reorganisation of the region did not completely die down. Against this backdrop, to ensure the continued existence of an undivided Assam, the Assam Sahitya Sabha declared that by 1960 Assamese should be declared as the official

¹¹ Sajal Nag(2011), "Linguistic Provinces' to 'Homelands': Shifting Paradigms of State-Making in Post-colonial India", p. 266.

¹² List of hill districts – Naga Hills, Lushai Hills, Khasi-Jaintia Hills, Garo Hills, North Cachar Hills, Mikir Hills.

¹³ Formed in 1946, it wanted nothing less than a separate state, but with the rise of Phizo to leadership in 1947, their demand became more secessionist in nature.

language of the state.¹⁴ This move of the plains' politicians should be understood as an endeavour to thwart the demands for reorganisation coming from within the region. Language issue takes a different meaning when it comes to the Northeast. The mainstream Assamese politicians hoped that this would redeem the humiliation of Bengali being declared as the official language in the past.¹⁵ APHLC and other Tribal organisations opposed such a move because they saw that their English educated children would be put to disadvantageous position. They also felt such a move would lead to disintegration of their unique and diverse identity because of imposed assimilation. The Chief Minister Bimala Prasad Chaliha tried to tread a middle path and said that government would wait for the declaration of Assamese as the official language till the demand came from non Assamese speakers. He hoped for the non tribals to accept Assamese voluntarily. This was ridiculed by local newspapers as being extremely odd and thoughtless and it enraged the mainstream Assamese speaking people. Chaliha was seen as letting down the mainstream Assamese. The situation was worsened by the demand of Bengal Sangram Parishad based in Cachar for making Bengali as the second official language of Assam and the official language of Cachar District. This was backed by the fact that Bengali was also spoken by a substantial number of people. The Communist Party of India's Gauri Shankar Bhattacharya insisted that Assamese be introduced in a phased manner but at the same time the rights of linguistic minorities should be adequately safeguarded. Proja Socialist Party in its state convention demanded immediate implementation of Assamese as the state language.¹⁶

Amidst such contention, Assamese was declared the official language in undivided Assam through the Official Languages Act of 1960.¹⁷ Such a move further alienated the non-Assamese speaking tribal people who felt it would put them to a disadvantageous position. They felt their own language and culture would be marginalised under the hegemony of Assamese language. The Eastern India Tribals'

¹⁴ Formed in 1917 under the Presidentship of Padmanath Gohain Baruah, this civil society organization is entrusted with working for the development of Assamese language, literature and culture in the modern period.

¹⁵ Assam was administered as a part of Bengal during the years 1826-1873. It was made a Chief Commissioner's Province in 1874. But in the partition of Bengal in 1905, Assam was incorporated as a part of East Bengal. Bengali was used as the official language in this period.

¹⁶ Sandhya Goswami (1997), *Language Politics in Assam*, Ajanta Publications, New Delhi, p. 52.

¹⁷ The entire body of the Act is provided in Appendix 1.

Union (EITU)¹⁸ formed in 1953 opposed such an imposition and made a claim for better representation of their interests. They based their argument on the absence of any social, political and cultural ties between the hill and plains people. The All Parties Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) also opposed such a move as an intense manifestation of Assamisation.¹⁹ The non-Assamese perceived it as *cultural imperialism*.

The passage of this act which compromised the rights of non-Assamese speakers led to a level of violence in the state. There was a rally in Shillong of non Assamese speakers shouting provocative anti Assamese and anti APCC resolution slogans in 1960. This was followed by a counter rally in Brahmaputra Valley insisting on the implementation of Assamese as the official language immediately. Such rallies were later followed by looting and pillage of people belonging to both linguistic communities especially in the dist of Sibsagar. Supporters of Assamese and Bengali clashed with each other. There was a rift in Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) also. While the state government wanted introduction of Assamese, the local Congressmen of Cachar supported the demand for introduction of Bengali. They wanted Assam to be declared a bilingual state. They felt that the constitutional safeguards for minority languages were not good enough. To find a solution to the linguistic tangle in Assam the then Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri suggested a formula popularly known as the Shastri Formula. He consulted APCC and a section of the Cachar people but to the disdain of the valley people did not involve any organisation from the Brahmaputra Valley. Shastri did not consult Assam Sahitya Sabha which was the forerunner of the language issue for the Assamese. The highlights of Shastri Formula are as follows:

- The Assam Official Language Act of 1960 may be amended to do away with the provision relating to Mahukuma Parishads.
- Communication between the state headquarters and Cachar and autonomous hill districts would continue in English until replaced by Hindi.
- At the state level English will be continued to be used along with Assamese.

¹⁸ One of the main objective of this formation was to work for the establishment of a hill state in Assam.

¹⁹ Ivy Dhar (2011), "Assam through the prism of Reorganisation Experience", in Sudha Pai and Asha Sarangi (ed.), *Interrogating Reorganisation of States: Culture, Identity and Politics in India*, Routledge, New Delhi. p. 290.

- The linguistic minorities in the state will be accorded the safeguards contained in the government of India's memorandum dated September 19, 1956.
- Some arrangements to be considered for effective implementation of development policies at the district level (Cachar).
- The agitation in Cachar should be withdrawn.²⁰

What this formula did according to the Sangram Parishad is rather than taking cognisance of the demand of the large number of Bengali speakers for a bilingual state, it paved way for a phased introduction of Assamese. The Official Language Act earlier had a provision by which Assamese could replace Bengali if the people's representatives in Mahakuma Parishads and Municipalities in a meeting decide to do so.²¹ This provision was not liked by the Sangram Parishad. The formula provided that this aspect of the original act might be amended. It also provided that ultimately Hindi should replace English over a period of time. But this was unacceptable to those making a case for Assam being declared a bilingual state as it did not grapple with the concerned question of the hour. It also came as a partisan approach because it was unable to garner the willing support of all parties concerned. During this period even within Cachar there was a division between the Bengali speakers and non Bengali speakers like Muslims and Manipuris who felt that the demand of Bengali being implemented in Cachar would end up imposing Bengali on them and marginalise them further.

The Sangram Parishad itself was seen as a body representing a partisan group.²² Their demands also seemed to be exclusivist at the local level. Non-Bengali speakers from Cachar in order to ensure that Bengali is not imposed on them joined the supporters making a case for having only Assamese. They were mainly Manipuris, Muslims and indigenous Cacharis. The rank and file of Sangram Parishad on the other hand was drawn from refugees and urban population. To put some kind of solution in

²⁰ Suresh K Sharma (2006), *Documents on North East India: Assam*, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, pp. 75-76.

²¹ Three-fourth of the members has to be present and voting to pass such a resolution replacing Bengali by Assamese.

²² Another association called the Santi Parishad claimed to be more representative with the support of non Bengali speakers like Muslims, Manipuris, Hindusthanis, Kacharis etc.

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place the Assam Assembly accepted the Shastri Formula and made an amendment to the Official Language Act. This move was criticised by Assam Sahitya Sabha as they believed doing away with the provision of possible introduction of Assamese in future was not doing justice to the rightful demand of making Assamese the sole official language. Neither was the amendment hailed by Sangram Parishad which continued with agitations for introduction of Bengali as an alternative official language for the whole state of Assam. Finally this amendment which failed to satisfy any party, was passed on 7 October, 1961.²³

The language issue was seized upon by the hill leaders for the separate hill state movement although this movement has its own independent genesis. The EITU was formed in 1953 exclusively to further this cause of a separate hill state. Its aim was to form a hill state which would include all the hill areas in Assam, whole of Manipur, the Naga Hills and the tribal belt of Tripura. The language movement gave momentum to this quest for a separate hill state. It also challenged the popular belief that Assam is a homogenous state without any fissiparous tendencies and it would continue to exist as a unified state. Although the language bill cannot be seen as the sole issue behind the separatist movements in the hills at the same time it cannot be denied that the leaders have used it to further their demand for separation by driving home the fear of forced *Assamisation*. Such imposition was laid bare in the clauses of the Official Language Bill.²⁴ Their stand on the language issue further proved that they do not want any compromise in asserting their demand for a separate state.

With the backdrop of demand for reorganisation, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi visited Shillong in 1966 and in a public meeting announced that the hill people would enjoy dignity. She made a commitment of giving political freedom immediately to the hill people to promote their essential economic growth. But she also pointed out that this should be consistent with some minimum and essential links to overall national unity. Some level of coordination was emphasised on. She ended on the note that reorganisation of the Northeast was not only important for the hill people but for others also as throttling the rightful aspiration of hill people would affect the overall prosperity

²³ Sandhya Goswami(1997), *Language Politics in Assam* p. 65.

²⁴ The act was aimed at ultimately implementing Assamese as the sole language for official use as pointed in clause 3 of the Act.

of the region. This underlined the fact that the government was taking the demands of the hill people seriously. But the government faced opposition from plains Assamese people. The state government of Assam pushed for some form of *agreed solution* when they saw that reorganisation of the Northeast was inevitable. The hill people continued to oppose such moves as they felt any agreed solution will put them in a compromising position. The state of Assam was against reorganisation. Their idea of agreed solution was a greater level of autonomy to the hill districts within the state of Assam. This would have put the hill districts into a subordinate position to Assam. This was not acceptable to the APHLC representing the hill people. Finally the region was reorganised.

Reorganisation of the Northeast

The demand of the hill people for separate state goes back to pre British days. The hills were never a part of Assam. The British incorporated them in Assam but continued to rule them separately. The Inner Line system which was defined for the first time under the *East Bengal Frontier Regulation* in 1873 was used to keep the plainsmen out of the hill areas.²⁵ This also provided for a segregation between the hill people and the plains people.²⁶ This system was initially introduced to stop hill tribals from raiding plains. But over a period while the hill people were allowed mobility to carry on fishing and hunting, the plains people could not go to the hills without a pass. This system while giving a free passage to western missionaries restricted the movement of plains people. The missionaries facilitated the spread of Christianity in these areas. These led to a difference in the religious and cultural composition and character of hill and the plains.

Such segregation hampered the growth of a unified nationalism amidst the hill people and the plains people against the British. This continued segregation made the hill people aware of their distinct and different identity from the plains' people even when they were made part of Assam after independence. The hill people were ready to

²⁵ Vijendra Singh Jafa (1999), "Administrative Policies and Ethnic Disintegration Engineering Conflict in India's North East", *Faultlines*, Vol 2, accessed at <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume2/Fault2-JafaF.htm> on 18 Sept, 2012.

²⁶ First introduced in 1873 this system was used to remove all outsiders not required by the British from the hills, further acts demarcated these areas as backward and kept them outside the purview of general laws.

resist any form of imposition of Assamese which was alien to them. Against this imposition, movements came up in almost all hill districts of the Northeast ultimately leading to its reorganisation.

Nagaland

The Naga Hill District Council (NHDC) came up as an organisation which was engaged in social activities in 1945. Its aims were to undertake social activities and to safeguard the unique culture and identity of the Nagas. It later renamed itself as Naga National Council (NNC) under T. Aliba Imti Ao. In its initial days the demand of NNC with regard to administration was for autonomy within Assam but in 1947 they demanded an interim government for a period of ten years. It was to be followed by a decision taken by the Nagas through referendum about how they want to be governed. But this movement of autonomy was transformed into that for a sovereign independent Nagaland after Angami Zhapu Phizo became the President of NNC in November 1949. The NNC demanded separation based on overwhelming support of referendum held in 1951. But both the Indian Government and the government of Assam denied such demands leading to breakdown of talks with the Nagas. The NNC boycotted the first elections held in 1952. Although there was no armed struggle, yet the government declared the Naga Hills a disturbed area and deployed Army to control the law and order situation. This can be seen as the first instance of putting into place a military solution for the Northeast's problems. Under military pressure the NNC hardliners declared the establishment of Federal Government of Nagaland in 1956 and put into place a virtual parallel government. Faced with such extreme show of secessionist tendencies, the Indian Government was compelled to respond with a conciliatory approach. They had to give in to Nagas' demand for self government. In 1957 the Naga Hills District was separated from Assam and became a Central Government Administrative Area and in December 1963 Naga Hills District along with the Tuensang Area of North East Frontier Agency was reorganised as the smallest Indian state with a population of 350,000 as Nagaland.

Meghalaya and Mizoram

Nagaland paved the road for similar demands from other corners in the Northeast. The demand of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hill people for a separate Hill State which found a vocal expression in the APHLC also carried on a protracted movement. The movement was especially intensified after the formation of Nagaland as a Central Government Administrative Area. The then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was compelled to take a closer look at the issue. He had to improve on his Scottish Pattern offer to APHLC.²⁷ This was followed by a Nehru Plan of Full Autonomy.²⁸ Following the Nehru Plan of Full Autonomy a commission called Pataskar Commission was formed to look into the feasibility of the implementation of Nehru Plan and recommend constitutional and legislative measures.²⁹ This Commission submitted its report in 1966.³⁰ The Commission wanted a minimalistic idea of autonomy and the continuation of the provision of District Councils.

The Pataskar Commission recommendations and the Asoke Mehta Committee recommendations failed to satisfy the demand of the region which was full statehood.³¹ After this there took place a number of meetings between the APHLC, the central government and the government of Assam and finally the central government came out with the January 13 declaration in 1967 that Assam needs to be reorganised. For the first time, the Indian Government conceded that the Northeast needs to be reorganised and instead of units subordinate to each other, there is a need to put in place federating units having equal status. This declaration also stated about the need of putting in place a regional federation which will be assigned a number of essential subjects of common interest while the rest would be left to the federating units.

Hence the announcement comprised of two parts—in the first part it specified details of reorganisation of the region which means division of the state into a number of units, but considering the geography of the area, its special need of security and

²⁷ Scottish Pattern mentioned a nebulous concept of hill people enjoying a certain amount of autonomy within the state.

²⁸ This plan envisaged 90 percent autonomy being enjoyed by the hill people.

²⁹ The Reorganisation of Assam- Federation or Clean Cut Separate State, an APHLC Publication, p. 12

³⁰ The report further diluted the financial power given to the autonomous hill areas government and reduced it to a mere advisory body which the state may or may not consult.

³¹ APHLC was not a part of the committee reducing it to represent the sole mainstream view of the Assamese. And it recommended that although hills should stay with Assam, the separate hill districts should have separate legislatures.

development, the announcement specified that reorganisation of the region must be combined with some level of coordination of the entire region. Government implemented a time limit of six months for the reorganisation. As the APHLC report points out this announcement was greeted with a lot of jubilation and was seen as a step of conciliation between the hill people and the plains people. The quest for reorganisation of Northeast which was set rolling as early as 1963 with the formation of Nagaland did not stop. And with the 22nd amendment of Indian Constitution on 24 December, 1969 the Indian Parliament created history by passing the Assam Reorganisation (Meghalaya) bill. Meghalaya Autonomous State was formed in 1970.

The Mizo issue also had a similar trajectory. Immediately post 1947 there were two formations in the Lushai Hills – Mizo Union and the United Mizo Freedom Organisation. While Mizo Union supported continuation of linkages with the Indian Union, the United Mizo Freedom Organisation wanted complete secession and merger with Burma based on racial affiliation.³² Under the leadership of Laldenga, in 1963, with the formation of Mizo National Front (MNF) a demand for a sovereign Mizo state for the people living in Lushai Hills came up and an intensified movement was put in place. In fact after the establishment of Meghalaya in 1970, the Indian Government which failed to suppress the Mizo National Front's demands with an armed response had to enter into an Accord with the moderates in the MNF. This Accord gave Mizoram the status of a Union Territory in 1972 and it attained full statehood in 1987.

Tripura, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh

The princely states of Tripura and Manipur were made *Central Government Administrative Agencies* in 1949, and in 1972 they were given the status of separate states. Coming to Arunachal Pradesh or the North East Frontier Agency which was made a part of Assam after independence, it acquired special military importance for the Indian state after the Chinese advance in 1962. And there was a need to strategically securitize the area. Treating such an area as excluded was no more an option for security reasons. The area was upgraded to Union Territory to bring it under direct Central Government's control in 1972 and was given full statehood in 1982.

³² Girin Phukon (1984), *Assam- Attitude to Federalism*, Sterling Publishers Limited, New Delhi, p. 48.

The underlying factor that led to the reorganisation of the region was *continued alienation and exclusion* of the tribal and hill tracts. The first reorganisation, the language movement etc failed to accommodate the aspirations of the tribal population. They were repeatedly pushed to the margins. The central government after independence continued to have a patronising attitude towards the hill tribes. This undermined their right to separate statehood and put in place an attitude that they are incapable of becoming part of modern democratic institutions and they should be continued to be under Chief Commissioners like during the British period. However relentless effort on the part of hill tribal leaders compelled the central government as well as the Assam government to change their attitude.

As a result in 1971, the Parliament passed five acts: North East Areas (Reorganisation) Act, the 27th 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.³³ These acts paved the way for the reorganisation of Northeast. And these developments completely ignored the SRC report so far as the Northeast 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.

The process of reorganisation of states started with the creation of Andhra Pradesh on linguistic basis. But Nagaland which is home to a number of tribes having their own distinct languages was the first state not to be formed on linguistic lines. As opposed to State Reorganisation Committee's support for bigger states which would be economically viable units, Nagaland was a small state with a small population. This state did not have big linguistic groups and was dependent on the central government for revenue. Hence Nagaland was the forerunner for the reorganisation of the Northeast.

³³ Sajal Nag "'Linguistic Provinces' to 'Homelands': Shifting Paradigms of State-Making in Post-colonial India", p. 268.

The North Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act passed in December 1971 conferred statehood on Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura in January 1972. Over the next few years the Northeast was reorganised in seven states till Sikkim joined it in the 1990s.

The reorganisation had more to do with the deprivation that the tribal population felt over a period of time. Popular narratives within the region emphasise how most states were made part of Indian state wrongly. Assam was wrongly annexed by the British with the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 after the Anglo-Burmese war, and handed over to India after independence.³⁴ Similarly Nagas were defeated by British but not by Indian State as no entity existed as Indian state at that point of time.³⁵ Similar cases were with Tripura and Manipur which were merged with the Indian state after independence.³⁶ But the hasty reorganisation put in place a model of state formation based on the idea of homeland. The premise was that development is possible only in one's own homeland. This put in place a vicious circle of demands of newer states which are far from over even today.

The reorganisation of the region put into place a number of changes. The move away from linguistic units made space for ethnic homelands. The formation of newer states gave legitimacy to sub nationalism. But as any one tribe or ethnic group was often located in more than one state, the notion of statehood based on primordial marker like ethnic identity put in place permanent border disputes between the states. The sub nations at the regional level saw integration to Indian nation and later Assam as hegemonic and hence imposed. As a result a "rebel consciousness" was manifested in these *nations from below*.³⁷ There is a nativist element strong in these movements. A "*cultivated politics of difference*" makes the question who came first to the region a pertinent one. It is a primordialist debate. The dominant ethnic group dominates other micro nations. Inarticulate communities are denigrated. The ethnic groups have a

³⁴ The first Anglo-Burmese war (1824-1826) ended with the victory of British East India Company and treaty of Yandaboo whereby Burma had to return previously conquered territory in Assam, Manipur and Arakan.

³⁵ The Naga hills district were annexed successively by the British govt and made a part of Assam in 1866.

³⁶ M S Prabhakara (2007), "Separatist movements in the north east: Rhetoric and Reality", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 42 No 9.

³⁷ Sanjay K Roy (2005), "Conflicting Nations in North East India", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 40 No 21, pp. 2176-2178.

misplaced and displaced anger against the neighbouring ethnic groups who they believe to be responsible in some way for their deprivation.

The January 13, 1967 declaration that laid the foundation for reorganisation of the Northeast also mentioned a regional federation. This showed the need for co-operation and co-ordination at the regional level. This was also accentuated by the fact that instead of big and stable states to ensure security in the border region, the Northeast ended up with a number of smaller states whose formations more often than not has been backed by agitations which often turned violent. The economic viability of these newer states 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.³⁸ 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 and see to it that there is no overlapping was felt.

Formation of the North Eastern Council

With regard to the regional federation, there was a 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 or 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. This was a departure from the former Zonal Councils formed with the first state reorganisation of 1956. The Zonal Council Act of 1956 clubbed the composite state of Assam with West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in the Eastern Region. But after the reorganisation of the Northeast, these states were placed under North Eastern Council which was the second outcome of the Reorganisation Act. The North

³⁸ Nagaland's claims for parts of Assam and Manipur for their Greater Nagaland or Nagalim is a cause for constant disturbance in the region.

Eastern Council was formed by the North Eastern Council Act 1971³⁹, Act No 84 of 1971. It came into effect from the 1st of August, 1972 and it was inaugurated on 7th November, 1972 by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. In her inauguration speech, Indira Gandhi pointed out that the first principle of development is co-ordinated activity. And this Council will provide a fertile ground for a co-ordinated approach to development⁴⁰. The primary purpose of the Council is the development of the region for greater human welfare. The council should emphasise on drawing up projects which benefit more than one unit. And it was a promising innovation in regional planning.⁴¹

With the formation of NEC two policy innovations were made—*firstly* the concept of a '*regional planning authority*' was put in place along with a separate plan and outlay. This was something new in the planning experience of India. The plan was to be executed under the supervision of the Council but it could not take direct responsibility. *Secondly* the Council was given the task of being a source of ideas for the development of the region for greater human welfare as well as the maintenance of security and public order.⁴² This Act was amended in 2002 to make NEC a *Statutory Planning Body* for the region. This Council was the first of its kind. As opposed to the Zonal Councils which provided a platform for interstate dialogue of states of a particular zone, the NEC was envisaged to act as a Regional Planning Body. For the first time a region had three tiers of planning – central level, regional level and state level. The NEC co-ordinates not only horizontally between the states to channelize policies properly but also vertically between the Central and state level plans. Apart from planning NEC also has the responsibility of channelizing funds for the implementation of various policies and functions as a nodal agency in terms of funding for projects in the Northeast.

The states of the Northeast often felt alienated culturally and economically. They had to follow mutual co-operation and co-ordination in order to ensure all round development. Despite having high potential of being the power house of the nation, the

³⁹ The North Eastern Council Act 1971, Government of India. The complete act is given in the Appendix 2 along with the amendment of 2002.

⁴⁰ Manjula Dowerah Bhuyan (2005), *The North Eastern Council*, DVS Publishers, Guwahati, Assam, p. 41.

⁴¹ Rafiul Ahmed and Prasenjit Biswas (2004), *Political Economy of Underdevelopment of the North East India*, Akanksha Publishing House, New Delhi p. 54.

⁴² B.P Singh (1987), *The Problem of Change—A Study of North East India*, OUP, New Delhi pp. 116-117.

region continues to be poor in power generation.⁴³ The small states could not undertake the huge costs for infrastructural development. As a result even though endowed with natural resources the region is lagging behind in terms of development. Moreover the power plants are sometimes situated in one state and cater to other states. In such cases co-ordination between the states are necessary to ensure smooth production and distribution of power. In recent years there have been clash of interests with regard to hydro power projects amongst states of the Northeast. The states of this region despite ethnic and linguistic diversity, have a certain geographic and socio-economic unity. Any socio-economic development programme for one state should not be treated in isolation as it is bound to affect other states as well. Roadways, hydel power projects etc are examples of the fact that the units are placed in such situation that there is no alternative to acting together. An absence of co-ordination in terms of planning can lead to deadlocks. In case of crisis between the states NEC plays a crucial role in breaking logjams by providing a platform for dialogue and mutual co-operation.

The idea of regional co-operation in economic development of the region crystallized in the North Eastern Council. This Council was set up under the NEC Act, 1971 with its headquarter at Shillong. It has the responsibility of formulating an area approach to the administration and economic development of the region as a whole. The Council has jurisdiction in all matters of common interest in economic and social planning, inter-state transport and communications and flood control. The Council provides the essential common base for exchange of opinion, expertise and strategy of security, good administration and development. This Council has a two-pronged approach- to provide development and security of the region. Both this aspects need a co-ordinated approach.

This Council is the result of a new experiment with state formation in India. The newly formed states of the Northeast because of lower level of development needed state support. The central government was not sure of the economic and administrative

⁴³ A study undertaken by Central Electricity Authority under the Ministry of Power, Government of India states this. This study is mentioned in Neeraj Vaghlikar and Partha J. Das's "Damming North East India: Juggernaut of hydropower projects threaten social and environmental security of the region", *Climate Himalaya*, Dec 10, 2010 accessed at <http://waterconflictforum.org/pdf/resources/article/dammingnortheastIndiasinglepageformat.pdf> on 15th Sept, 2013.

viability of these states. As the Act rightly states the Council should work towards a balanced development of the Northeast region. The NEC is an advisory body and not a supervisory body. This regional planning body formulates annual plans to supplement the state and central government plans.

Composition of the Council

The Council is comprised of the seven states of the North East along with Sikkim now.⁴⁴ The Chief Ministers and the Governors of the member states are members of NEC. Three members are nominated by the President. The Chairperson of the Council is to be nominated by the President from among the members of the Council. The President if he deems it necessary might appoint a Union Minister as a member and also nominate another member to act as the Vice Chairperson of the Council. However these provisions have not been used so far. The Act states that the Chairperson should be nominated by the President and underlying assumption is that some parity should be maintained within the states.

Powers and Functions

“The NEC has been set up with the principle object of effecting a fast and balanced social-economic development of the entire region through co-ordinated regional planning with a special set of priorities best suited to the peculiar needs of the region”⁴⁵

As depicted elaborately in Section 5 under the heading *Functions of the Council* of the act, the Council shall be an advisory body and may discuss and give advice on issues that concern one or more member states and also mediates between the Centre and states as a channel for dialogue. Issues can range from common interest in the field of economic and social planning, inter-state transport and communications, power or flood control projects of common interest.

In order to ensure a balanced development of the North eastern Areas, the Council formulates for the states a unified and co-ordinated regional plan which will be in addition to the state plan of respective states with a regional approach. The plans of the

⁴⁴ Sikkim became a member in 2002 with the amendment of the bill.

⁴⁵ Manjula Dowerah Bhuyan (2005), *The North Eastern Council*, p. 43.

Council are supposed to cover the areas left by the national plan and the state plans. The Council formulates annual plans to bring forth unified and coordinated regional plans in regard of issues relating to common interest. It can discuss about the prioritising of projects and schemes included in the regional plan and the stages in which the regional plan may be implemented. It has the jurisdiction regarding deciding the location of projects. In fact it has to review the progress of various projects and based on such review it has to recommend to the Central Government in terms of financial assistance to be given to the concerned states.

In case a project is intended to benefit one or more states the Council recommends how such a project is to be executed or implemented and managed or maintained, how the benefits there from may be shared and the burden of the expenditure incurred in the project. The Council also has to do a timely review of the progress of expenditure of the project and recommend to the Central Government regarding the quantity of financial assistance to be given to states entrusted with the execution of the project.

It also has to recommend to the Central Government regarding undertaking new and necessary surveys and investigation of projects to facilitate the consideration of the feasibility of including new projects in the regional plan. The Council has to review from time to time the measures taken by the member states for the maintenance of security and public order and recommend from time to time what more measures need to be taken in this regard. The Act provides for a statutory post of a Security Adviser and currently, the Director General of Assam rifles is ex-officio Security Adviser to the Council.

The Act also lays down propositions as to the working of the Council. The Council was supposed to meet as and when the Chairperson deems it necessary but in 2002 it was amended to meet twice a year normally. In the absence of the Chairperson and the Vice Chairperson the meetings will be chaired by a member elected by the other members. The proceedings of each meeting shall be forwarded to the central government and the state governments.

Conclusion

The North Eastern Council was established as a result of the reorganisation of the region. The first reorganisation largely left the north east as it was. This was favourable for the state of Assam while being disadvantageous for the hill districts of Assam which often felt exploited by the plains people. As a result a number of developments like protracted insurgent movements in Nagaland, the language movement in Assam and other movements led by Tribal hill leaders raised their demands for right to separate state. The second reorganisation which started with formation of Nagaland in 1963 acknowledged the legitimacy of the demand of the tribal population but at the same time put in place an institution to bind the states together. The Council was an institution to ensure that the newly formed smaller states don't lag behind in terms of development. The region became a planning unit for integrated and co-ordinated regional plans and the Council was given the responsibility for formulating developmental policies for it.

Chapter 2

Role and Function of the North Eastern Council

The North Eastern Council was formed in 1971 for the all round development of the region of Northeast. Over the last four decades its role has undergone many changes. With the establishment of the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region in 2004, its role became more dynamic. The aims and objectives behind its formation were to provide an integrated and co-ordinated road map of development for the region which has been lagging behind. To get a better idea of its role and function, this chapter will look at its role and function as highlighted in the Act that led to its establishment. The important aspects of the functions of this Council is to work for the all round development of the entire region, to act as an inter-state co-ordinating body, to act as a regional planning authority, to ensure maintenance of public order and security and finally to put in place a feedback mechanism at the regional level.

Role of the Council

The North Eastern Council dovetails the state plans at the regional level to avoid overlapping and put in place a co-ordinated approach. This Council which forms the middle tier of planning in the region is not a *supra state* and it does not encroach the power of the states. It is also not aimed at changing the relationship between the centre and the states. As often feared it does not interfere in the working of the states or interfere on behalf of the central government, rather on issues like transport, communication and other infrastructural developmental issues where a co-ordinated approach for the region is more welcome, it tries to channelize crucial information to ensure effective planning for the region. The Planning Commission while drawing up plans for the region incorporates the valuable inputs given by the NEC to ensure that even at the planning level the concern of the region is taken into account. This is crucial as reports on the development lag of Northeast and underuse of resources point out that

plans often fail to respond to the needs of the region at the planning level itself.¹ 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. A regional planning authority can close this gap by intervening at the formulation level itself. The Council acts as a catalyst to give momentum to development of the region. It is a stepping stone towards decentralisation of planning. To give more power to an advisory body Indira Gandhi decided to put funds at its disposal.

After independence regional disparity was one of the glaring problems in the country. To address this India went for planned development. While under planning achievements at macro-level have been good, there are discrepancies in micro level. This is visible very prominently in the Northeast. The Northeastern region is an administrative unit with separate states having distinct characteristics and specific needs. But because of locational proximity and topography the states share some common characteristics. As a result the possibility of a regional plan that can correspond to the common needs of the states is the responsibility of NEC. The Planning Commission although has specific plans like Hill Plan or Plan for the Northeast Region, they are highly centralised with a top down approach. In such a scenario, NEC fills the void by bringing an integrated approach to planning. It is entrusted to cover the spaces that are left both by the policies of centre and the state. Hence NEC plays the crucial role of being a co-ordinating body at the regional level to ensure a balanced development of the region.

Functions of the Council

The North Eastern Council Act states the functions that the Council has to undertake. Part 4 of the act states the main functions of the Council as-- make recommendations regarding issues of concern for more than one state especially projects related to flood, inter-state transport and communication etc. For a balanced development of the region the Council shall formulate regional plans along with prioritising projects and schemes and reviewing their progress. The Council reviews the

¹ Nimmi Kuriem and Jayashree Vivekanandan (2010), "Exclusion in Resource Governance in India- The Northeastern States", Working Paper for Centre for Policy Research, Delhi accessed at <http://www.siid.org.in/images/Working%20paper%202010.pdf>, on 5th April, 2013, p.2.

implementation of the project from time to time and works for co-ordination amongst the government of the different states of the region. The Council's review forms the basis of flow of finances from the Centre. Lastly the Council also has to review the law and order situation in the region. A detailed account of its function is as follows.

Formulating policies for regional development

Post-partition the concern of the Indian state with these isolated and semi-isolated areas was whether to go for assimilation or integration. India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in his Panchsheel spelled out the government's attitude towards them.² He was opposed to any kind of imposed modernisation that would jeopardise the different livelihoods of the people. However the policy of letting them to be on their own although save guarded their cultural uniqueness failed to improve their economic condition. Such a policy was not even sufficient to guarantee the cultural development of the region. Post 1962, in the aftermath of the Chinese aggression, how the centre perceived this region changed.³ The region turned into a frontier which had to be controlled and securitised, while development and quality of livelihood of the people took a backseat. The stronger grip on the region diluted Nehru's idea of not allowing too many outsiders in the region. Now the outsiders in the region were not the plainsmen for whom the restriction was initially meant, but the coercive arm of the state in the form of army and military personnel. The face of the Indian government closest to the people was the army.

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 the role of an agency for integrated development of the region, the Council identified certain priority sectors such as power, transport,

² 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.

³ In 1962, the Chinese launched a simultaneous offensive in Ladakh and along the MacMahon Line owing to border disputes. They captured Rezang la in Chusul and Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh. Chinese declared a cease fire and the war ended.

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.⁴ The policies that it undertook in each sector are as follows.

Agriculture

Although the economy of the Northeast is largely agro-based, the region continues to import food products from other parts of the country. The region suffers from deficit and low productivity. To boost the agricultural sector, NEC undertook a number of projects in Horticulture, Animal Husbandry in the Northeast.⁵ NEC has financed 37 schemes. During the 10th Five Year Plan, the Council had approved schemes, such as High Density Plantation of Apple and Integrated Horticultural Development in Arunachal Pradesh, Expansion of Turmeric Cultivation in Meghalaya and Tripura, Strengthening of Basic Agricultural Training Centre, Promotion of Strawberry Cultivation in Meghalaya, Promotion of Arecanut Plantation, and Mushroom Cultivation in Mizoram, Promotion of Organic Food Production, Vermi Compost Project in Nagaland, Strengthening of Gram Sevak Training Centre in Tripura, Demonstrative Project for Improvement of Crop and Soil in Assam and Tripura and Establishment of Bio-fertilizer Unit in Sikkim, and Promotion of organic food Production and Vermi Compost Project in Nagaland.⁶

It has supported schemes for development of tea and medicinal plants. One achievement of the NEC is the establishment of the *North Eastern Regional Agricultural Marketing Corporation* or NERAMAC in 1982 which has to ensure cost effective market for the products produced in the region. To make sericulture and other handicrafts industries commercially viable NEC set up *North Eastern Handloom and Handicrafts Development Corporation* (NEHHDC) in 1977. To boost the rural economy NEC undertook the scheme for cultivation and production of ramie fibre in 1997. To make available high yielding variety of seeds in the region the NEC set up three tissue culture laboratories.

⁴ Pallabi Borah(2009), "NEC and the Development Initiatives in the North East", *Dialogue*, Jan-March Vol 10 No 3.

⁵ Manjula Dowerah Bhuyan (2005), *The North Eastern Council: Organisation, Management and its role in the Socio-Economic Development of the region*, DVS publishers, Guwahati, pp. 72-76.

⁶ Information provided on the official website of NEC www.necouncil.in and accessed at <http://www.necouncil.nic.in/index2.asp?slid=49&sublinkid=81> on 6th April, 2013.

Looking at Jhum cultivation as a reason for lower productivity of agriculture, the NEC put in a lot of emphasis to persuade the Jhummiyas to shift to settled cultivation. But this initiative had its limitations, because there was not enough land and proper irrigation facilities for settled cultivation, and high end technologies failed to be culture specific. Innovative schemes like terraced cultivation, half moon terracing although was technically more useful and productive, detached the local population from agriculture. This is a reason why people did not shift in a large number to settled cultivation. Agriculture provides employment to a major group of population due to the absence of industrialisation. A bigger part of funding under NEC goes to Transport and Communication, Power Sector.

Agriculture is a state subject. There is no regional overtone to the kind of policies taken up by NEC like establishing seed farms, watershed management projects etc. The states are better equipped to take them up. There are different agricultural practices between hills and plains, a unified common project or policy initiative is difficult to put in place. Plains mainly practice settled cultivation while hilly areas historically practised shifting cultivation. NEC tried to put in a uniform practise of settled cultivation by encouraging the jhummiyas to shift to settled cultivation.

NEC has funded many state initiatives like *Nagaland Bee and Honey Keeping Mission* which is aimed at boosting development for agriculture. To improve the quality of the local stock the NEC had set up farms for breeding superior stock to serve the entire region. For improving the production of fodder, 2 fodder seed production farms had been established - one in Tripura and the other one in Arunachal Pradesh. NEC has taken up this scheme to establish Biological Production unit (Institute of Veterinary) in Tripura, Manipur and Meghalaya to cater to the need of the states in the region. The NEC has co-ordinated with the states in their agriculture related undertakings and make fund available for projects undertaken by the states.

Industries

The backwardness of the region is marked by slow industrial development. There are no large industries in the region. Most tea and rubber plantations are owned by people from outside the state leading to profits being drained out. Oil refineries are

outside the region leading to massive wastage of oil produce. Due to poor transport and communication, transport costs are high. Even now primary sector provides the major source of income. Deprivation in the region has led to insurgency which in turn discouraged the inflow of capital from outside the region. Many large and medium sector enterprises have been declared sick and closed down.⁷ Boosting the sick industrial sector was an aim of the NEC. With the launch of *North East Industrial and Investment Promotion Policy* (NEIIPP) in 2007, the bulk of industrial initiatives are taken up by the Union Ministry of Commerce and Industry. So NEC's function in terms of industrial development of the region is limited to providing infrastructural support.

Under the umbrella scheme of SPINE (Scheme for Promotion of Industrialisation in the North East) which was sanctioned during the 9th plan, the Centre gave Rs 5 crores to NEC. The important components under this scheme are: Promotion of Industrial Products of the Region, support to workshops on entrepreneurship for Northeast entrepreneurs, training-cum-familiarisation for N.E entrepreneurs outside the Region, consultancy for upgrading the capabilities/performance/output of promoting organisations/small units etc, scheme for support to Research & Development proposals in the Industrial Sectors, incentive scheme for promotion of Micro/Tiny enterprise in the Northeast. Hence keeping in mind the fact that small scale industry can boost the industrial scenario in Northeast, NEC has been associated with setting up medium and small sector enterprises in the region.

The table below shows state wise distribution of units of micro, small and medium enterprises in the North East for the year 2010-11.

State	No of Units
Assam	26887
Meghalaya	5497
Tripura	2180
Mizoram	5403
Manipur	4881
Nagaland	9315

⁷ Walter Fernandes (2004), "Limits of Law and Order Approach to the North East", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 39 No 42.

Arunachal Pradesh	829
Sikkim	279

Source: Ministry of MSME Annual Report 2011-2012.

Medium and small sector industries can help traditional industries like handicrafts and cottage industries and tackle the unemployment problem to some extent. This does not need any specific natural pre-condition or locational advantage like Power projects. State governments along with NEC can intervene and try to bring up the other states at par to Assam. Along with these msme, two new schemes, that is, setting up a Manufacturing Unit for Tread rubber, Cushion gum and vulcanising solution in Silchar, Assam and setting up of a Mineral Water Manufacturing Unit at Dimapur, Nagaland has been sanctioned under this scheme.

Infrastructure

A major part of NEC's function is to ensure infrastructural development for the region. As the small states on their own cannot incur huge costs required for the up-gradation of the infrastructure of the region, the NEC takes it up. Infrastructural components like Power, Transport and Communication, Manpower Development, Policies for Floods and Erosion etc can be developed under a regional plan and all the states of the region can benefit from them. NEC's major funding goes to Power and Transport sector. Its function in this sector can be understood by looking at the various projects that the Council funded under these headings.

a) Power

The Northeast has been hailed as the potential *Power House* of the country with huge untapped hydro-electric power. If this potential is exploited, the region can provide for itself as well as produce surplus. At present the power consumption in the region is much lower than national average.

The following table gives the average per capita consumption of regions for the year 2009-2010.

Regions of India	Per capita consumption of electricity in Kwh (sub total)
Northern region	695.11
Western region	1116.92
Southern region	938.88
Eastern region	481.36
North Eastern region	257.98

Source: Based on the data released by the Ministry of Power.

The per capita power consumption of the NER is 257.98 kwh as opposed to Northern Region's 695.11 kwh.⁸ Dadra and Nagar Haveli with a per capita consumption of 11863.64 has the highest consumption. Comparing these data shows the dismal power scenario of the region. On the other hand because the region is a seismic zone prone to earth quakes, the thrust has to be on small hydro power projects as opposed to mega dams. *North Eastern Electric Power Corporation Limited (NEEPCO)* which was established by NEC in 1976, funded a number of projects like the Kopili Hydro Electric Project, the Baramura Gas based Power Station in Tripura, Doyang Hydro Electric Project in Nagaland etc. However the power scenario in the region is still bleak because of a) insufficient generation b) underutilisation and c) inadequate transmission system.⁹

The NEC funded a number of Transmission Projects at Kopili, Gohpur, Lunglei Lawngtlai, Doyang, Ranganadi etc. The NEC took up the Renewable Resources of Energy (RRE) during the year 1982 for promoting the utilisation of Renewable Energy in the states. More than 300 villages in the region have been benefitted from this project. These villages were provided solar power electrification, solar cooker, biogas plants, integrated rural energy programme, SPV Water Pumping, SPV Water Purifier

⁸ Report of Ministry of Power on per capita consumption of power, accessed at Press Information Bureau of India, accessed at <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/erelease.aspx?relid=74497>, on 14th May, 2013.

⁹ M Ramachandran (1992), "Power Generation in the North Eastern Region: Problems, Prospects and the NEC's Role", *Yojana*, 1992, p.43.

etc. As many as 50 charitable organisations like hospitals, schools, colleges, churches etc have benefitted from appliances run by solar power. Along with this the Council took up a large number of training programmes, exhibitions and construction of energy parks in the region.¹⁰

Mega power project like the Ranganadi Hydel Power Project with a capacity to produce 2000 MW electricity has been delayed completion by many years. Civil society associations, some students group from Assam led by All Assam Students' Union (AASU) as well as experts are of the view that the massive dam with a height of about 155 metre has a high risk of collapsing as it is situated in a seismic zone. And in such a scenario, there may be flash floods and a huge number of villages will be inundated specially in Assam leading to massive displacement.¹¹ Issues of displacement go hand in hand with projects of building dams in the region.

b) Transport

The landlocked region of Northeast suffered from a huge disadvantage because with partition the traditional trading routes through Bangladesh were disrupted and natural ports like Chittagong were lost. Post-independence the limited improvements in transport have been mainly strategic responses to the security issue. This was aggravated after the Chinese aggression in 1962. The region is still not well connected with the rest of India. The sole connecting road is the narrow 22 miles *Chicken Neck Corridor* which is often unfit for use because of floods. This region has a high density of roads but all weather roads are very few. NEC since the fifth five year plan has been taking up projects for building roads in the region. Till 7th plan, road projects covering 7107 km was taken up. These projects have been completed but because of huge spill over costs, there was no project for road in the 8th five year plan. In 9th and 10th five year plan 11 and 57 road schemes were taken up respectively. NEC under the 11th five year plan initiated 56 new road projects, of which 25 have been given in principle approval by the Planning Commission. All these schemes are at different level of completion. In case of Sikkim which came under NEC only in 2002, 20 road schemes were taken up during the 10th plan.

¹⁰ Data provided at the official website of NEC at www.necouncil.nic.in, accessed on 3rd March, 2013.

¹¹ *The Hindu*, Nov 1, 2010.

NEC funded few bridges in the Northeast like the Koliabhomora Bridge and a part of Jogighopa Bridge. The National Waterway II which runs from Dhubri to Sadiya was supposed to be made completely functional by 2009 but it is not completed yet. Reach of railways is mainly limited to Assam further alienating the other states in the region. The project of connecting the region to the mainland like most other projects has been responses to strategic requirements of the country. In case of air connectivity, the NEC was involved in the up-gradation and improvement of existing Airports in the Northeastern Region by contributing 60% of the funds as per the projections/calculations of the AAI. So far, 10 such airports have been taken up. However out of 10 projects in Arunachal Pradesh, 3 are meant for civilian use as opposed to others being for the use of Military and Army personnel.

c) Manpower Development

North Eastern Council set up institutes like North Eastern Regional Institute of Science and Technology (NERIST) and Regional Institute of Medical Science (RIMS) for the development of the scientific temper of the region. It also undertakes the operational cost of these institutes. But apart from these, NEC mostly funds for the up-gradation of institutes like Regional Dental College in Guwahati, Regional College of Nursing in Guwahati, Dr. B. Barooah Cancer Institute etc.¹² Few other projects that the NEC funded are Regional Institute of Pharmacy in Agartala, Regional Survey Training Institute in Agartala, North Eastern Judicial Officers Training Institute in Guwahati, Regional Centre for Trainers in Farm Management at Rani, Regional College of Physical Education at Panisagar, North Eastern Regional Institute of Water and Land Management, Cane and Bamboo Technology Centre, North Eastern Space Applications Centre etc.¹³

Hence the Council under the ambit of developmental policies, undertakes a number of initiatives for the all round development of the region. Apart from the above mentioned policies and projects the Council also initiates projects for irrigation and flood control, it encourages research in the biodiversity of the region, undertakes

¹² S.D Phukan (1992), "Science and Technical Education in the North East and the North Eastern Council", *Yojana*, p. 34.

¹³ Data provided on official website of NEC, www.necouncil.com, accessed on 3rd March, 2013.

initiatives to encourage tourism in the Northeast. These are aimed at the development of the region.

Co-ordinating amongst states

The Council when it was formed in 1971, had a two pronged objective – to ensure development and security of the region. The precondition for both is co-ordination amongst the states at the regional level. The Council provides this much needed co-ordination between the states. The Northeastern region is landlocked geographically. But unlike other landlocked Indian states it is surrounded completely by international borders. 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.¹⁴ Landlocked spaces are human constructs unlike island spaces which are natural constructs. Hence 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 hampers an integrated development of the region. This has to do more with the socio-political history of the region.¹⁵ The British often used the policy of Divide and Rule amongst the people of hills and plains to avoid a unified national struggle against the British.

¹⁴ M S Prabhakara (2004), "Is North East really landlocked?", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 39 No 42, pp. 4006-4007.

¹⁵ The inner line system put in place by British made most parts of the North East inaccessible for others.

In a sectoral summit of NEC on roads which was held on February, 2007 issues that clarify the internally locked nature of the region emerged:

- Density of all roads in the region is far less than the national average. The national average is 1.42 km of road length per square km of land while in the region the best is Assam with 872 metre and Tripura with 1.40 km while Manipur has a poor density of 490km and Meghalaya has 379 km.¹⁶
- Out of 6880 km of National Highways, 3725 km are less than 2 lane.
- Agartala, Aizawl and Gangtok are not even connected by 2 lane National Highway.
- 62 District headquarters are not connected even by 2 lane road.
- Backward, remote and border areas are grossly deficient in terms of proper road connectivity.¹⁷

Hence there is a gap between the states both in terms of physical and ideological connectivity. Historically it was between the people of 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. In such a deadlock, the Council provides a platform to bridge some of this gap. The Council provides a platform at two levels:

- 1) 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.
- 2) 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.

This function of the council is manifested in its sectoral summits and annual meetings. To strengthen this function of the Council, in its 53rd Annual Meeting held in 2006, it was decided that sector wise meetings will be held to streamline the policies of the Council on specific sectors. These meetings were also platforms for the states to

¹⁶ Economy overview accessed at Centre for Development and Peace Studies, accessed at http://cdpsindia.org/ne_economy.asp on 20th May, 2013.

¹⁷ The document of the sectoral summit meeting on roads stated these findings.

address inter-state grievances if any. In the meeting on Floods and Erosion, the Assam representative in this summit wanted Arunachal Pradesh to be assisted in afforestation to check erosion which will affect Assam. Arunachal Pradesh representative complained that the Brahmaputra Board has not done any work in the state.¹⁸ Its work is mainly concentrated in Assam. He also emphasised that concerned states should be consulted and interstate disputes to be sorted out first before launching projects of a regional character.¹⁹ The Brahmaputra Board's activities are very limited, not present in Tripura, Arunachal and Nagaland. Whereas in case of Sikkim which is an erosion prone state, out of 16 projects prepared for taking erosion control measures, the Board has sanctioned only two. This attitude towards Sikkim may be because of its location outside the region. Erosion in Sikkim will not immediately impact the region and specially the state of Assam where the Board has concentrated more. That cannot justify the treatment meted out to Sikkim.

Coming to its second function, the Council also 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 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.

In another instant of policies leaving out the North East, the Accelerated Irrigation Benefit Programme which is a central government programme aimed to help with minor irrigation projects in the Northeast leaves out Tripura due to inadequate surface flow. The state cannot access the benefit under this scheme. AIBP norms should be altered to include ground water development and construction of check dams. Sikkim

¹⁸ The Brahmaputra Board was established in 1980 under a central act to minimise the impact of flood on the state.

¹⁹ Sectoral summits document published by Ministry of DoNER.

representative suggested that AIBP should bring down the minimum criteria of 20 hectare for irrigation to 5 hectare to be more specific to the region.²⁰

The sectoral summits looked at each sector in a thorough manner and tried to lay down a proper roadmap for going ahead. Such meetings provided for review of ongoing policies and allowed for the NEC to take into account the gap between formulation and implementation. It also provided a platform for the states to acknowledge how Central Government policies often sideline the specific need of the region. The states because of their geographical nature often fails to access the benefits under these schemes which further pushes them back on the scale of development. It also paved way for the interstate differences to come to the fore front and allow the states to sort it out and hence pave way for cohesive regional plans.

During formation of the Indian state, the merger of Northeast lacked an element of democracy.²¹ 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 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.²² Incidents like fake encounters in Manipur, the rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama etc shows that by this act state violence was institutionalised. 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 in 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. And this the Council tried to do by putting into place a co-ordinating mechanism. Such a mechanism not only

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Manipur which was an erstwhile princely state was acceded to Indian state under highly undemocratic situation. The King when visited Shillong was in a way forced to merge the state with the newly formed nation while his aim was to ensure the status of a loose federal arrangement giving more powers to the state.

²² 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, pp. 36-38.

gave a space for the state's dissent to be placed democratically, it also tried to accommodate their concerns with regard to government policy. A democratic vent of dissent is very essential for a region which is marked by violent insurgent movements claiming to address the age old alienation.

Formulating Regional Plans

One of the important functions of the Council is formulating regional plans. 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.²³ But with the Industrial Revolution the notion of region being a spatial unit characterised by unique physical, economic and cultural characteristics came to be criticized due to development of communication and decline of self sufficient traditional local economic units. 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 facial features the region does not relate ethnically and culturally to other parts of India.

A region as a unit of planning may be delineated on the basis of firstly, *homogeneity* based on some physical, economic characteristics, secondly on the basis of *nodality* or polarisation usually around some central urban place and thirdly on the basis of *government policy* or programmes.²⁴ The generally backward economic condition of the Northeastern region supplies the element of homogeneity while the physical features make a way for interdependence between the states. But scholars have time and again pointed out that the construction of the label '*north east*' was purely for administrative reasons and does not serve any purpose. This is because the region in itself is very diverse internally. And a term like the 'Northeast' overlooks such internal diversity. Regional planning for such a region addresses the questions of backwardness and tries to bring down the regional disparity. But regional planning in itself if not informed by egalitarian motives will not solve the problems. Regional planning aims to maximise the

²³ Rafiul Ahmed and Prasenjit Biswas (2004), *Political Economy of Underdevelopment of North East India*, Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, p.70.

²⁴ Amalendu Guha, S K Chaube and Sunil Munshi (1975), "Regional Development and the National Question in North East India", *Social Scientist*, Vol 4 No 1, p.43.

productive capacity of the region. If there is a tendency to promote only particular sectors of the economy with an aim to serve the metropolitan interests, this should be seen as colonial hangover.

In terms of the region of Northeast there is a need for shifting the emphasis from growth poles to planning from below. The internal diversity within the Northeastern region is very high. Such diversity makes a uniform policy virtually impossible to formulate. In the words of Mrinal Miri—North East should not be reduced merely to an object of policy or an area that can be manipulated to reap benefits with respect to its rich raw materials.²⁵ This will put in place a lopsided development.

Regional disparities in India have been a reason for the adoption of planning. Post 1991 with liberalisation and privatisation, this scenario has anything but improved. While government hailed private investment as a way out of the perennial underdevelopment of the region, a study of the pattern of private investment shows that they are concentrated in few states like Gujarat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu etc. while it has been substantially low in states like Assam, Bihar, Orissa etc.²⁶ An already developed infrastructure is a pre-condition for private investment. Opening up the Northeast for private investment without government ensuring an infrastructural development will be defeating the purpose. Too much emphasis on private investment for a region like the Northeast is also dangerous as the region used to protective regime may not be able to cope with such change. Again such private investment may not lead to balanced regional development and reinforce intra-regional disparity.

Most achievements of a planned economy has been at the macro level, as one comes down to the micro level much is yet to be done to achieve meaningful economic development and social justice. Indian planning has been more or less centralised. It is a developmental plan formulated at the top by the Planning Commission and superimposed on the states, formulation being entirely the sole prerogative of the Planning Commission. There is no effort at dovetailing the various policies from the

²⁵ "India's North East Policy: Continuity and Change", editorial, 17th Oct, 2010, accessed at <http://manipuronline.com/research-papers/india%E2%80%99s-north-east-policy-continuity-and-change/2010/10/17> on 12th April, 2013.

²⁶ N J Kurian (2000), "Widening Regional Disparities in India: Some Indicators", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 35 No 7.

bottom of the administration. Planning process in India is highly bureaucratized. Experts and local bodies are hardly consulted. Same procedure is for state plans, prepared at various departmental levels and then integrated at the secretariat level more to fit in with central proposals than to respond to special needs of the states.

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 Northeastern 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.²⁷ The NEC follows a specific procedure while formulating annual plans for the region. For every financial year, NEC has steering committee meetings for the annual plan of the following year. In these meetings, states give priority lists of projects to the NEC. The Council in turn formulates regional plans by dovetailing the priority lists of states given in the form of Concept Papers. The NEC has the discretionary power to decide whether to accommodate the priority lists or not. At times it completely bypasses them.

NEC's plans provide 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 Northeast a logical unit of regional planning. NEC while formulating plans also does the function of bringing states together by ensuring they can use their locational advantage. For example, in the 16th Steering Committee Meeting in 2009 when Mizoram wanted greater access to power, NEC suggested it could use power from Tripura's Baramura Power station. Thus NEC while looking at state specific policies, at times initiates inter-state co-operation and co-ordination. In the plans of NEC a common issue has been inadequate funding and a request to the Centre to increase the outlay. In the approach paper of NEC for the eleventh plan, it requested to transfer the operational costs of institutes like NERIST and RIMS to line ministries and this was done.

²⁷ Manjula Dowerah Bhuyan (2005), *The North Eastern Council*, p.50.

Over the years NEC undertook projects which would benefit more states like projects on communication, regional institutions imparting a variety of professional education, and services like tertiary health care etc. All this have contributed to promote regional amity and cohesion. However with similar resource base, there is also a possibility that the states are increasingly competing among themselves. This might escalate to local conflicts which the NEC can channelize on productive lines. It is a platform where dialogue can be initiated to make sure such conflicts are mitigated before they create problems for the state.

Regional planning does not replace 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.

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. However its functioning tries to be flexible to accommodate the needs of the states. While maintenance of roads is a state subject, NEC suggested that it could be accommodated under the heading of up-gradation. Most policies are left with the states to be implemented, and state finance departments usually take too long to release funds to the implementing agencies. As a result the policies are often delayed leading to time and cost overrun.

Maintaining Law and Order

The law and order situation of the region has been a concern of the Centre ever since the region was reorganised. AFSPA which was put in place in 1958 in the Northeastern states portrayed the region as a disturbed area. This response was a part of the centre's solution to the movements demanding reorganisation of states and the violent route such movements sometime took. Keeping in mind such incidents, the

North East Council Act had a clause that stated amongst the functions of the Council, periodic review of the law and order situation in the region and help the states with maintaining public order. 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.²⁸

In 2004 the Council was placed under DoNER from MHA. Hence DoNER is the administrative ministry 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 mentioned of doing away with this provision of security, the amendment brought it back to the centre stage. This pushes NEC back to the MHA.

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 1986 by Indian Air Force is still fresh in the minds of the people.²⁹ The insurgency problem is made a scapegoat for all the deprivation of the region including misgovernance.³⁰ 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.³¹ The ever increasing number of insurgent outfits, some purely as extortionist bodies, puts a serious question on the counterinsurgency policies of the centre.

²⁸ The full text of the amended act is given in Appendix 3

²⁹ 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 Northeast.

³⁰ Neelesh Mishra and Rahul Pandita (2010), *The Absent State: Insurgency as an Excuse of Misgovernance*, Hachette India, Gurgaon.

³¹ Walter Fernandes, "Limits of Law and Order Approach to the North East", EPW.

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.³² The region also felt that it was merely being used as a buffer state 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 indulges in dialogue with insurgent groups and it sidelines civil society and human rights groups. The only way to make the government take note is to take up arms.

Although law and order maintenance is a very crucial issue, at present the Council has no specific function regarding it. However it has a Security Advisor. But the Amendment of 2002 hoped that the Council will take up periodic reviews of the law and order situation. For this the Council has to refer to MHA and not DoNER. This would require a lot of co-ordination between the Council and the MHA. The Council does not have personnel and expertise for such co-ordination. Putting developmental clause along with maintenance of security against projects development as mediated by security.

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 regard to the region. While the Council through its periodic meetings provide valuable

³² Sunil Nath, "Assam: the Secessionist Insurgency and the Freedom of Minds", accessed at <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume13/Article2.htm> on 15th April, 2013. The people of the region felt that the Prime Minister has given up on them.

inputs to the Central Government, it was bypassed during the biggest initiative of the Centre's Northeast related policy that is the Look East Policy.

The Look East Policy of India which was initiated in 1991 earmarked a deeper economic and strategic engagement with India's eastern neighbours. In this policy which was initiated in the days of P.V Narasimha Rao, a larger role for India's Northeastern region was envisaged. India historically was aloof from South East Asian politics. While decolonisation did not bring a crucial change in the international division of labour, Brettonwoods' Institutions like International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank through their Structural Adjustment Lending (1986) and Structural Adjustment Plan (1980) institutionalised the disadvantageous position of the erstwhile colonies.³³

India moved towards South East Asia and ASEAN for trade because SAARC was not very successful in development of the region. The Look East Policy was a culmination of this shift. This shift in India's policy was expected to boost the development of a region which is lagging behind in terms of development. This marked a move in India's foreign policy from being completely Pakistan-centric within the security paradigm and sub-continental in character. India aimed to emulate the ASEAN Tigers' model of development. Post Gulf War India had to look for alternative sources of energy. The Look East Policy was a logical outcome of these compulsions. Cultural affinity was seen as boosting co-operation with the neighbouring countries.

The region has a very high stake in this policy. In the Northeast because of historical reasons who initiates a policy becomes more important than what is initiated. Marked by deeply entrenched alienation the value of an economic policy should not be only its intrinsic worth but how it is formulated.³⁴ Where development has been essentially a top down process, the government gearing up to implement LEP had to open the floor for discussing its pros and cons to the region. The beneficiaries or the stakeholders should be an essential part of decision makers. Discourse on development should be generated in public spheres. The NEC should have been the nodal agency to

³³ Thingnam Kishan Singh (2009), "India's Look East Policy: Origins and Conceptualisation", in Thingnam Kishan Singh (ed.) *Look East Policy and India's North East*, p.11.

³⁴ Samir Kumar Das "Looking East via the North East: The Ethnic Dimension" accessed at www.merg.ac.in on 10th April, 2013.

take up these activities. But it was bypassed. The central government failed to use the Council to let the region reflect what it needs and what the policy of opening up the Northeast to international competition will mean for the region. As a result there is a gap between what the government feels about LEP and what the people of the region feel about it.

The Northeast belongs to the Indo-Burmese biodiversity hotspot having exotic flora and fauna. Cultural affinity between the people of the region and those staying in the neighbouring countries will work as a catalyst in ensuring a co-operated approach to development.³⁵ To make LEP a reality C-NES submitted its report titled “*Winds of Change, Hope for renewal: Listening, Learning and Implementing*” in 2006. The NEC also requested National Institute of Public Finance and Policy (NIPFP) to prepare a Vision 2020 document which would put into place a strategy for the peace and prosperity of the region.³⁶ This document emphasises six development components namely self governance and participatory development, creation of development opportunities, developing sectors with comparative advantage, capacity building of people and institutions, create hospitable climate for investment and building infrastructure through public investments.³⁷

But are government’s ambitious plans with regard to the Northeast reflective of where the region stands in terms of development? A look at the sector-wise contribution to Net State Domestic Product would show the decrease in contribution by primary sector has been supplemented by tertiary sector in place of secondary sector. The contribution of each sector is also diverse requiring the need for specific policy initiatives. Taking an account of the unemployment scenario, the employment in primary sector has come down marginally compared to the contribution of primary sector to NSDP. This shows the presence of disguised unemployment in the sector. The gap between male and female in terms of unemployment also is in favour of male. There is a severity of educated unemployment as there is a dearth of job opportunities.

³⁵ Ajailiu Niumai (2009), “Development and Discontent meet in the North East: Perspective on India’s Look East Policy” in Thingjam Kishan Singh (ed.) *Look East Policy and India’s North East*, p. 49.

³⁶ Jayant Madhav (2009), “The Story of North East Vision 2020”, *Dialogue*, Jan-March.

³⁷ North East Region Vision Document 2020, a Ministry of DoNER Publication.

The policy puts very high emphasis on border trade. But if the Northeast is opened to international border trade, the Northeastern region will be the weakest link. Amongst the many shortcomings of the policy the fact that it aims at isolating Pakistan which shows India's age old threat perceptions and security concerns have not changed.³⁸ 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. Some Committees are of the view that people of the Northeast cannot expect to develop while remaining cocooned and isolated. They cannot lapse into localism.³⁹ But globalisation should be considered viable based on its distributive performance. Scholars are also 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.⁴⁰ But too much hope is pinned on the level playing field that civil society would provide. In the Northeast 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.

There is no regional market ensuring free flow of goods and capital. The other states are not linked properly to Assam. Economic disintegration worsens the 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.⁴¹

Conclusion

The Council undertook various functions over the last four decades. Its main focus was to ensure all round development and security of the region. But the various thrusts of its functions had certain shortcomings. While the Council was supposed to be the nodal agency in the region, newer formations often bypassed NEC. The

³⁸ *ibid*

³⁹ Shukla Commission Report, Government of India.

⁴⁰ Samir Kumar Das(2010), "India's Look East Policy: Imagining a new geography of India's North East", *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs*, Vol 66 No 4.

⁴¹ Gorky Chakraborty "North East Vision 2020: A Reality Check" accessed at <http://www.idsk.edu.in/common/file/oc-33.pdf>, on 12th February, 2013.

Committee of Secretaries under the Chairmanship of Home Secretary constituted in October 1997, the North East Chief Minister's Forum formed in May, 2000 have the tendency to bypass the NEC. The NEC before being restructured was seen as mainly a body for allocating funds to the states. This led to a lot of *ad hocism* in its functioning although it is a crucial function as states compete amongst themselves for getting more allocations of projects. A regional perspective for a land locked region is a must for sustainable development of the region. It has adversely effected the systematic, co-ordinated long term planning for the region. Time and cost overrun have become common features of policies of NEC.⁴² To put in place devolution of power for the region, the execution of policies should also be entrusted to NEC.

⁴² "More Devolution of Powers", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 36 No 37, 2001.

Chapter 3

North Eastern Council: An assessment

The North Eastern Council since its inception in 1971, has been working for the all round development of the region of Northeast. The Council was entitled to formulate regional plans for the region. Over the last four decades it has worked as a co-ordinating body among the states of the region and between the states and the centre. This chapter will assess the role of the Council. To get a fuller idea of what the Council did for the development of the region, it will take an assessment of the Council and its functions. The Council's formation was supposed to put in place few changes in the region as to how the centre dealt with the region. This chapter will try to understand what the very establishment and existence of the Council means for the region. It will start with mentioning about the moment of the formation of the Council, the political and economic imperative that led to its formation. Then it will try to assess the powers and functions of the Council, how the nature of its work has gradually changed over a period of time. It will try to trace what the establishment of the Council was expected to achieve and what it has achieved in real terms. The Council was supposed to put in place a decentralised planning for the region, it was to usher devolution of power to the region, to put in place inclusive governance to ensure inclusive growth etc. It will try to assess NEC's role in the light of these functions. The twin objective of the Council was to ensure development and security of the region. After the Council have been around for four long decades, where the region stands at present in terms of these two pronged functions is what this chapter will look into.

Politics behind formation of the Council

The North Eastern Council was formed in the wake of the re-organisation of the region of the Northeast. The NEC was different from the Zonal Councils. Zonal Councils were formed at the wake of the first linguistic reorganisation of the states. The aim behind these formations was to keep the federal idea alive. The Zonal Councils mainly had 2 functions: co-operation between the different zones and co-ordination between centre and states. Five Zonal Councils were set up—the northern, southern, eastern, western and central. The Zonal Councils were an interesting experiment in co-

operative federalism. The aim was to counter linguism or too much state consciousness by binding the states of one zone with each other based on some idea of unity.¹ While Zonal Council was just a mere platform for states of a particular region to come and have a dialogue, the NEC was given a bigger role. The NEC was not merely a co-ordinating body like the Zonal Councils but given the role of a regional planning body to usher in development for the spatial units of Northeast marked as a planning region.

While Zonal Councils were aimed at countering linguism and statism, the NEC was accommodative of the diversity in the Northeastern region. Assam was taken out of the Eastern Zonal Council. In terms of demography, topography and level of development, Assam was different from the other members of the Eastern Council like Bihar, West Bengal and Odisha. So instead of making a new North Eastern Zonal Council for the region on the lines of Article 15-22 of the States Reorganisation Act, the NEC was made because a new Zonal Council may not have met the special requirements of the region.² Also as Zonal Councils were nearly ineffective, it did not seem a good option. But the greater power of NEC, made it look like a supra- state which might have usurped the power of these newly formed states rendering the recent reorganisation ineffective.

The newly formed states with a huge international border was geo-politically too precious to be left alone. The Council was one way of ensuring a continued presence of the centre. The Council was to be headed by Governors appointed by the President. In the region where ex army generals have often been appointed as governors, a council headed by one of them was seen as a centre's agent.³ The Council whose function was development along with security was to ensure that the security factor is never sidelined.

The reorganisation put in place a system in the region which was faulty at many levels. While it let loose ethnic sub nationalism which is still strong in the region, in terms of development it entrenched a faulty policy framework. Central assistance was

¹ P K Sharma (1969), "Zonal Councils in Indian Federation", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 4 No 4, p.263.

² M S Prabhakar (1973), "The North Eastern Council: Some Political Perspectives", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 8 No 40.

³ Sanjib Baruah (2005), *Durable Disorder*, OUP, London, pp.68-70.

assured to the states. As a result the states became heavy administrative units without working to develop their internal financial resources. Instead of putting in place an efficiency- oriented economic process, there is a politically led distribution oriented process.⁴ The Council in its very formation was not given the mandate to address these problems. In fact it re-entrenched the problematic understanding of centre of developing the region only by funnelling funds and securitising the region, as if it was a frontier. These limitations plagued the Council at its very birth.

The council and its powers

To understand the function of the Council for the region we should start from its composition. The Council gave representation to the region in its interaction with the Centre. At present the members of NEC are Governors and Chief Ministers of the eight states along with three nominated members by the President. Such a set up is very exclusivist in the Northeast because it makes no provision for representation of the Autonomous District Councils in the region. The Autonomous District Councils were set up in the regions which the British left out of its ambit of administration as *excluded* or *partially excluded* areas. They were left largely un-administered in exchange of annual revenue paid to the British. Keeping in mind the cultural difference and the backward nature of these areas, on the eve of independence with the Sixth Schedule, these areas were given special provisions for their administration. The idea was to not impose modern administration on these areas.

As opposed to assimilation of these areas the approach as advocated by Verrier Elwin and Jawaharlal Nehru was of phased integration. The institution of Autonomous District Councils which had the power of dispensing justice and collecting taxes was to act as an arrangement to slowly make the people more conducive to broader Indian political institutions. These Autonomous Councils acted as a vent for the outlet of socio-political unrest that hampered this region. They were not mainly for economic development but an acknowledgement of the traditional institutional set ups that these tribes had for ages. But these Councils had certain limitations. The political aspect of

⁴ Gulshan Sachdeva, (2000), "India's North East: Rejuvenating a Conflict Driven Economy", *Faultlines*, Vol 6, accessed at <http://www.satp.org/satporgrp/publication/faultlines/volume6/Fault6-GSach-F.htm> on 15th May, 2013.

the Councils compelled the leaders to not tax the voters but rather tax the non-tribals. This brought down the revenue collected by these Councils and they have always suffered from lack of resources. Over the years nepotism has adversely impacted these institutions. The leaders have often used these bodies for political gains.⁵ The Pataskar Committee Report pointed this as early as 1966.

Despite the shortcomings that the Councils suffered from, they broadened the pool from which state and national leaders are chosen. They gave launch-pad to leaders from these backward areas. Bypassing these institutions in the Northeast means leaving a major part of the region outside the development process. NEC does not accommodate them. This puts a question on the representative character of the Council. It seems it prioritises the states over these bodies. But as these bodies are often at places which are most backward, such exclusion reproduces the alienation that the tribal population has felt for long.

The manner in which the Chairperson was elected also puts in place a concern for the democratic institutions. Till the formation of the DoNER Ministry in 2004, Governors of the Northeastern states being elected the chairperson shows an attitude to undermine the democratically elected leaders of the region. And this went for a long time. The Governors who are often not from the region may not be able to voice the real concerns of the people and also fail to be representative. In the Northeast, with a complex demography and a complicated history of merger in India, questions of development, identity and security are deeply intertwined. Any isolated approach without acknowledging the interconnectedness will have an adverse impact. Gubernatorial over reach has been a character of Indian politics. Governor who is appointed by the President and holds his office till the pleasure of the president have often been used to oust democratically elected state governments by the Centre.

The region and the centre have always been suspicious of each other. Giving the responsibility of NEC to governors who hold office at the pleasure of the President made the whole institution look like an agent of Centre and an unwanted presence in the region. The highly bureaucratised institution mostly has administrative officers from

⁵ David Stuligross (1999), "Autonomous Councils in North East India: Theory and Practice", *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, Vol 24 No 4.

outside who are not able to relate to the aspirations of the people of the region. Hence in its very composition this institution does not bring the region to the fold of mainstream as it claimed to.

Coming to the *powers and functions* that this Council was entrusted with, the government was very ambitious in giving a number of functions to the Council. Along with working on various proposals aimed at development of the region, it has to take up periodic reviews of the projects which is going on and the various stages at which more funding should be put into is a discretion of the Council. It was also given the statutory status of Regional Planning Body with the 2002 amendment. But such powers had its limitations. The Council although made plans with issues concerning infrastructure, floods, the power scenario, road connectivity which has a regional bearing, most projects had cost and time over run because the executing agencies were not under the supervision of the Council. Most projects are delayed because of this lack of accountability.

In case of regional planning also there is a gap between what the Council puts in its plans and how much of it is accepted by the Centre while formulating plans for the entire region. This can be understood by taking an example. The plan related papers of NEC always points to less than adequate funding for the region. The fund allocated by the centre is always less than what the Council demands. Another problem that plagues the Council is in funnelling the funds to specific agencies which undertake the execution of the projects. Most projects are handed over to state agencies and the fund is given through the state governments. So even if the Council hands over the state government the funds on time, the state government at times release the funds very late to the relevant body. This delays the whole project.

A contentious aspect of the Council's function is to review the law and order situation of the region. For this the nodal ministry is Ministry of Home Affairs. The region has always suffered from being thought of as a frontier. Things became worse post 1962 when the concept of buffer zone re emerged. The region came to be seen as a buffer zone against violent neighbours. As one of the steps towards securitising the region, violent mechanisms like re-grouping of villages in Mizoram was undertaken to bring every aspect of the people's lives under the panoptican gaze of the surveillance

state.⁶ People were forced out of their homes and made to live near the army camps under extreme surveillance. The development of the region has always been overdetermined by the security concern of the country. And this was also reflected on the fact that a developmental agency like NEC was put under the supervision of a Ministry of Home Affairs which looks into matters of security. But the provision for maintenance of law and order situation in the Council's act is problematic for a number of reasons:

- a) The Council does not have adequate resource or expertise to tackle questions of security. Sadly the Council could not even be a platform for pointing out the excesses that happen under the garb of Armed Forces' Special Power Act. As a result the provision seems like a mere token.
- b) Without adequate resource such a token provision's very presence points to the continued security paradigm in place in the region. Securitisation will mediate development. It may seem that development in isolation to securitisation cannot be thought of within the policy circles.
- c) Such continued emphasis on securitisation undermines the need for transparency and accountability of government institutions. But these are the very markers of how policies are being implemented in a region ridden with backwardness. Policing frontiers have reduced political space.
- d) It reproduces the very problems that it was formed to counter. It is representative of the centre's patronising attitude of treating Northeast as a stubborn child which needs to be controlled. There is no treatment of the region on an equal footing. The people are further alienated and instead of working towards integration, a subservience model is put into place in the region.

Coming to other policy initiatives of the Council, most policy initiatives in the region have been response to strategic needs of the country. Air connectivity and access to the region is a pre-requisite to ensure that 1962 does not happen again. In case of other initiatives also the requirement of the nation and how the region can contribute to it determines the policy contours. An apt example can be treating the region as the

⁶ Walter Fernandes (1999), "Conflict in North East: A Historical Perspective", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 34 No 51.

potential *Powerhouse* of the country. Per capita power consumption in the region is one of the lowest in the country. But because of the presence of natural rivers, there is huge untapped hydro power potential in the region. The present dams are small in size. Ranganadi is the only large power project. The viability of big dams have been a concern in the region especially after the June 2008 flooding in Assam due to sudden release of water from the Ranganadi hydel power project. In seminars convened by AASU zoology experts pointed out that the dam will affect water quality and hydrology along with affecting the terrestrial ecosystem of the river and the area.⁷ In 2012 massive protests led by Akhil Gogoi's Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS) and a number of other organisations took place which blocked roads and did not let building material to be carried to the building site. Their main contention was that if the dam is constructed, a large number of people belonging to the Mishing community will be displaced.⁸ Because of the nature of the terrain, the dams built in Arunachal Pradesh will affect the lives of people living in the downstream of Assam which is called the *downstream impact* of the dams.

Constant emphasis on power projects and the need to make the region produce surplus for the country sidelines the fact that there are international disputes between India and China regarding sharing of river waters. China which uses the highest quantity of thermal power in the world emitting a high quantity of carbondioxide is looking for alternatives. China is planning to tap hydro electric potential in the Yarlung Tsangpo (this is the name of Brahmaputra in China). Its plans for building mega dams will impact the flow of water to India and thwart India's hydel power ambitions.⁹ Without taking this aspect into account, the Indian Government and the ambitious state governments going ahead with signing Memorandum of Understanding (MoUs) to develop potential power projects is dangerous. Apart from this the emphasis on producing surplus for the country shifts the focus from Small Hydel Projects which is conducive to the earthquake and flood prone regions to large dams having greater capacity but larger risks in case of earthquakes and floods.

⁷ *The Times of India*, August 31, 2011.

⁸ "Subansiri dam protests: Blocade of Arunachal Pradesh Continues", *Down to Earth*, 4th Jan, 2012

⁹ Girish Shirodkar (2012), "Playing Chinese Checkers with India's hydro sector", *Power Watch India*, July.

The perennial underdevelopment and the outburst of violence from time to time have made sure that the region figures prominently in the policy circle of the centre. The centre tries to come up with newer policy initiatives to rope in the underdevelopment of the region. But the government fails to change the paradigm which leads to the formulation of faulty projects. The Look East Policy has been around at least in policy papers for quite some time. But in 2006 the focus was shifted to the Northeast region and what LEP means for it. While the Indian government has ambition of making the region like Yunnan city of China, a free trade zone where border trade with the neighbouring countries of South East Asia will be accentuated, it bypasses the infrastructural deficit that the region suffers from.¹⁰ Scholars have pointed out that opening the region to the neighbouring countries without infrastructural up-gradation runs the risk of making the region a mere transit point to the international trade. At such a point the only outcome of encouraging border trade will be a death knell for the small local cottage industries hampering local producers and further impoverishing the region. The region right now is the weakest link in the Look East Policy. The fact that the LEP is still on paper with very few things being done on ground questions the commitment of the government.

The problem with the present policy framework as pointed out by scholars of the region is till now security concerns and the need of the nation over determine how the region should develop. Along with this misplaced emphasis, there is also excessive emphasis on infrastructural development. But there is no essential co-relation between infrastructural development and the development of the region.¹¹ While agriculture still provides 40% of income to the region, the bulk of investment goes to power and transport but not for up gradation of agriculture. There is a need to prioritise headings for spending and put in place meaningful policies instead of just ambitious policies. The LEP is also a response to the country's need to find an alternative to the underperforming SAARC and the containment of China's excessive influence in South East Asia. The region's needs are still far from central to the country's policy initiatives.

¹⁰ Sanjib Baruah, *Durable Disorder*, OUP, p. 225.

¹¹ Rafiul Ahmed and Prasenjit Biswas (2004), *Political Economy of Underdevelopment of North East India*, Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, p. 55.

Limitations of NEC's policies

The development related policies of the NEC suffers from a number of limitations. The agricultural productivity is low. The reasons for low productivity are inherent constraints like topography, small land holdings, community ownership of land and feudal tenurial patterns along with low input intensity, poor technology transfer and weak post harvest infrastructure.¹² The NEC put in policies to encourage Jhumias to give up Shifting Cultivation and take up Settled Cultivation. These initiatives did not change the agricultural scenario of the region. It still continues to be less productive. The Jhum cultivation or the slash and burn system which was practised by most tribal groups in the hill areas was seen as a major obstacle to development and modernisation of agriculture.¹³ It is essentialised as a primitive practice which cannot be reconciled with modernisation of agriculture. The practice is seen as a reason of deforestation, land degradation, erosion, ecological imbalances and floods in the plains. Denigrating Jhum cultivation by situating it within the narrow ambit of econometrics and profitability did not help.¹⁴ The tribals were not taken on board when an integral part of their culture was being changed.

As opposed to the belief that Jhum Cultivation is wasteful, it was viable as long as population density was low and pressure on land was not much. But with the demographic transition and an increased pressure on land it was not as viable as before. So these changing realities should be the guiding principles of encouraging people to give up Jhum cultivation rather than pointing out inherent problems in a practice which is embedded in their culture. Such practice makes the scheme an imposition from above.

The NEC sets up small and medium sector enterprises in the region for providing livelihood to the people. The highest number of small and medium sector enterprise units is located in Assam showing a discrepancy in state wise distribution. The other states are lagging much behind with Sikkim having only 279 units. This is due to the locational advantage and a comparative advantage of infrastructure in Assam.

¹² Report of the Working Group on Agricultural Development in Eastern and North Eastern India, Planning Commission of India, 2001.

¹³ Trees in a space is burnt to create a clearing. The potash in the ash adds nutrients to the soil. And in this fertile soil crops are planted. This is a part of shifting cultivation practiced by tribals.

¹⁴ Debojyoti Das (2006), "Demystifying the Myth of Shifting Cultivation: Agronomy in the North East", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 41 No 47.

Comprising of plains areas and being connected to the rest of the country through railways gives Assam an advantage over the hilly states of the region. But this shows that the intra-regional imbalance is not countered properly by NEC.

Such gaps within the states in the region which resulted from faulty government policies re-entrenches the belief that there is a bias towards Assam leading to centralisation of most developmental endeavours in Assam. Three of the states of the region were previously districts of Assam—Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya. Assam has the largest representation in the parliament. All these factors put the state of Assam as the centre of the region and make the other states feel alienated still now. This has been called the Assam Syndrome.

Same pattern is seen in terms of policies of funding institutions for Manpower Development. If one looks at the pattern of funding of NEC, most of it goes to Assam because Assam already has an advantage in having a larger number of established institutions. This imbalance can be checked only if NEC intervenes by starting and funding new projects in states which are yet to catch up with others. NEC should divert its funds for initiating new institutes.

Decentralised Planning

One of the major functions of the Council is to formulate plans at a regional level and promote decentralised planning. Planning in India has been more or less a centralised activity. But because of positive co-relation between project performance and beneficiary participation, the Indian state from the very beginning of planning looked for ways to decentralise the process. The Community Development Project was launched during the very first five year plan. During the second five year plan, the overarching aim was to reduce regional imbalances and under this plan the concept of district planning started taking shape. The need for decentralisation was felt because model of planning was macro-level and hence aggregative and sectoral. This fails to take into account the details or specificities of projects.¹⁵

¹⁵ Abdul Qaiyum, (2004), "Decentralised Planning in India: Issues and Options", *Journal of Institute of Town Planners, India*, Vol 1 No 2.

Article 243 ZD of the Indian Constitution provide for District Planning Committees. But this leaves out the areas which are under Sixth Schedule. Under this schedule, the areas have a different institutional set up called the Autonomous District Councils. The idea behind the Autonomous District Councils for scheduled areas which were excluded for a long time from mainstream administration was to mediate the imposition of modern institutions in a tribal set up. The aim was to provide freedom to the people in their socio-cultural sphere. But these Councils are not essentially tuned to usher in economic development at a large scale or to provide grass root participation to the people.

In the words of Gunnar Myrdal "*Policies should be decided on by some sort of democratic political procedures and they should, as far as possible, be implemented with the co-operation and shared responsibility of the local and sectional communities.*"¹⁶ Before the experiment with Panchayati Raj Institutions through the 73rd and 74th Amendments, it was through the NEC that decentralised planning in a limited sense was introduced in the region. It was a very limited exercise as the Council's power was very narrow and it was limited to only the Northeastern region. But at present because of the limitations of the Autonomous District Councils, the NEC's responsibility to put in place decentralised planning in the region is greater. In case of planning at the grass root level, the District Planning Committees are supposed to put together the plans formulated at the village level. In case of Autonomous District Councils, due to the absence of proper mechanism as well as constitutional provision, only MLAs represent the non-government members in the State Planning Board leaving out people from other civil society groups. The District Planning and Development Council represent the Autonomous District Councils.

The Autonomous District Councils cannot be substitute for the Panchayati Raj Institutions. The problem with decentralisation being restricted to Autonomous District Councils is that the District in Autonomous District Councils is much bigger than normal districts, at one point having a population of 26 million.¹⁷ The districts formed as such have more to do with the protection of identity of the people than merely being

¹⁶ Sumarbin Umdor(2009), "Decentralised Planning in the Sixth Schedule Area of India", *Man and Development*, March.

¹⁷ David Stuligross "Autonomous Councils in North East India: Theory and Practice".

viable administrative units or development units. As a result the representation is limited to very few people in such districts leaving out a large number of people of any opportunity to directly take part in the planning process. The stakeholders are left out.

Decentralised planning is required for inclusive governance. Governance at the lower level is far from inclusive. A lot of funds are pumped into the lower level projects but they are not controlled by the elected representatives of the people. To initiate a process of people's planning as opposed to planning from above, planning has to be decentralised. The development to be a participative one and not a mere bureaucratic one, the beneficiaries at the grass root level should be made part and parcel of the planning process.¹⁸ Decentralised planning must rope in traditional knowledge systems of the people. The ongoing paradigm of top down decision making demolishes the traditional practices like holding common properties and undermines traditional knowledge.¹⁹

In the Northeastern region there is a contention that there is a wide gap between the need of the region and what comes from the centre in a top down planning process. Apart from limitations at the implementation level, there is a gap at the formulation level of the plan projects itself. The policies fail to respond to the need of the people. The NEC which formulates plans at the regional level also bypasses the Autonomous Councils. This leaves out people from areas who are already considered backward than others in the region. Hence decentralised planning in the Northeast has been limited in the way as introduced by the government. In the absence of PRIs the Autonomous District Councils must be given the power to work as same but even they are left out of the ambit of NEC.

The concept of regions as units for planning is still not very popular in India. In such a case constructing the Northeast as a planning region and putting in place NEC was a new experiment. Although it was supposed to be an advisory body, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi issued a directive after the Council was formed in 1972 to make sure that the advices of NEC are accepted provided they don't go against the policies of

¹⁸ M S Aiyar and Nupur Tiwari (2009), "Inclusive Growth through Inclusive Governance in India's North East", *Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance*, Issue 2, January, 2009.

¹⁹ J B Ganguly (1996), *Sustainable Human Development in the North Eastern Region of India*, Regency Publications, New Delhi, pp. 69-72.

the Indian Government.²⁰ Hence decentralisation in planning was introduced in the region but in a limited sense. In practise *Planning from Below* is still far from achieved. In fact planning is still very centralised and officialised. In the present set up there is no provision for participation at grass root level. The state plan is prepared by piecing together departmental proposals formulated by different government departments. There is no consultation or discussion of general or specific objectives or proposals and no information is available outside the official circles. In case of NEC's regional plan, the imperative is of the bureaucrats. And as expected the process does not percolate down to people below state level or different departments of the state. All plans are formulated at departmental level with guidelines set out by the Planning Commission. There is no dovetailing these plans with plans formulated at lower levels. Decentralisation is necessary to ensure that the goods of development are not centralised in few sites. But a continued centralised planning process which does not open up the process to people at grass root level, puts in place a mechanism which centralises even the trickledown effect of development leading to reproduction of inter- regional and intra-regional imbalances.

Devolution of Power

Devolution of power especially in a federal country is necessary for democracy. Although the nature of Indian federalism has been contested, over a period of time India has evolved into a strong federation. The word federation does not appear in Indian Constitution. And with the backdrop of partition, there were centralising tendencies immediately after independence. But despite this there was assertion of federalism since the very independence. First was in the form of linguistic reorganisation, second was the 1967 elections which marked the end of one party dominance with Congress losing in many states. Subsequently there were demands from the states for greater powers and greater say in administration. The frequent misuse of Article 356 was also condemned.

Regional parties came up which brought an assertion on central government from the regions. The National Front government which was a coalition of such parties formed the Inter State Council in 1990 to ensure more powers to the state units. Watershed event in the devolution of power has been the passing of 73rd and 74th

²⁰Arijit Bhattacharjee "Role of NEC in Developing North East", Editorial in *Assam Tribune*, Aug 01, 2009.

amendments which put in place local self governments. These were the constitutional blocs for transferring democracy to the grass root level. But over the period of time the PRIs has been affected by mainly a lack of clarity as to how to proceed scientifically, objectively, methodically and practically down the path of devolution.²¹ To make local governance effective there is a need to carefully delineate functions, functionaries and finance and avoid duplication of roles. Devolution of functions is often not matched by devolution of funds and functionaries.

In case of Northeastern India, the areas under Sixth Schedule are outside the purview of PRIs. Devolution in such areas happens through the Autonomous District Councils. Apart from this, above the state level, devolution from centre happen through the North Eastern Council. But in case of the NEC, the devolution is mainly financial in nature. The central government puts a lump sum of money at the disposal of the Council and the Council in turn funds specific projects in states. The devolution of power at this level suffers from certain limitations. The devolution and delegation of power is incomplete. The advisory nature of the Council reduces it to a merely funding body and does not give it the power to supervise implementation of the policies. However funding was never a problem in the Northeast. As opposed to inadequate funds, it is the way in which the funds are allocated and the absorptive capacity of the region which is important with regard to the development of the region.

A number of committees like the Second Administrative Reform Committee in 2007, National Advisory Council have suggested that the Ministry of DoNER which is perhaps the weakest Central Ministry should be done away with and NEC should be equipped with more powers.²² NEC is ill equipped in terms of functionaries to dispose its work. As a result it often delegates its functions to bodies that it floats from time to time. This leads to a lot of ad hocism in its functionality.²³ Devolution will be meaningful only when the NEC is given enough power to compliment its funding capability and make sure that funds channelled to projects are being utilised properly. Otherwise unaccounted funding will just feed into the *terrorist economy* which is in

²¹ *The Hindustan Times*, April 23, 2013.

²² Anne Sophie Maier (2009), "Government of India's North East Policy", a paper submitted to Heinrich Boll Stiftung India, New Delhi.

²³ "More devolution of Power", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 36 No 37, 2001.

place in the region. It has been alleged that there is leakage of funds which ultimately ends up sponsoring the insurgent movements in the region. Scholars have often advocated more powers for NEC. But it cannot substitute elected bodies. More power for NEC shows a lack of trust for the democratically elected state governments. The Council even with limited devolution of power seems like aimed at roping in the secessionist tendencies in the region.

Devolution of more powers to NEC at the regional level is beneficial for the region as a whole but cannot justify the absence of devolution to lower level local self governments. The whole states of Meghalaya, Mizoram, some parts of Assam and Tripura don't have local self governments. Participatory governance for the people of the region who feel excluded and alienated can be ensured through governance at the grass root level. In doing this Autonomous District Councils have their limitations. NEC also has no mechanism to ensure such devolution. Over a period of time the spread of PRIs to these states can only make sure that representation in the true sense of the word is ensured to the people. The region has suffered from superimposition of the mainstream political institutions. Hence the ADCs seemed a better idea to respect the cultural freedom of the people. But this is not enough. The traditional institutions can work in tandem with local self governments. There is a provision for reserving 33% seats in PRIs for women which is very important for ensuring representation to women. And the tribal areas are out of the ambit of such a measure to ensure representation to women. While Autonomous District Councils have legislative power, they don't have provision for reservation of women.²⁴ One might argue that women in tribal societies enjoy better status than otherwise, but there cannot be anything wrong in institutionalising such representation to give women a better voice. NEC also does not have any provision for such reserved representation. Hence in the absence of PRIs the region is excluded of some important institutional mechanisms for greater devolution of power.

Inclusive Growth and Development

²⁴ Dipanjan Roy Choudhury (2005), "Autonomous District Councils and Panchayati Raj Institutions in North East India", *Dialogue*, Vol 7 No 1.

The region suffered for a long time from feelings of exclusion and alienation. Inclusive growth and development was the overarching goal of the eleventh five year plan. Inclusive growth is possible only with inclusive governance. The Northeastern region has some traditional institutions which are inclusive to some extent. Inclusive growth is growth process spreading through the various institutions of democratic, representative, participative and popular development.²⁵ To ensure inclusive growth, the first concern should be to make the fruits of development available to the people of the region residing in interior of the villages.

In government documents policies of empowering people by maximizing self governance and participatory development through grass root planning has been there. But in practice this has been thwarted as planning from grass root level have not been accommodated in final plans. Inclusion at every level is mandatory to ensure designing and implementing people centric programmes which can harness the resources of the region to the fullest. Inclusive governance is possible through effective devolution of functions, finances and functionaries. As most areas of the region are outside the ambit of PRIs, devolution is ineffective. In such case the pressure on NEC for being inclusive is heightened. But NEC in turn also excludes. Situated in Shillong and controlled by DoNER Ministry from Delhi, it is not accessible to most people of the region. The internally locked region makes travelling from one place to another difficult.

Although inclusion at the regional level is important because this region has been left out of mainstream decision making for a long time, it cannot be adequate. Inclusion will have to be at lower level also. The patronising attitude of the centre which imposed policies and institutions on the region from time to time continues. This is proved by the fact that Autonomous Councils in the region are plagued with inefficiency, corruption and nepotism. But still the Panchayati Raj Institutions have not been put into place. NEC does not give representation to units below the state level. But in the Northeast state formation being a cause of contention for many and marked by frequent demands of secession, reaching out to the people by putting a highly bureaucratic institution at the regional level is not enough. The Northeast has a number of traditional institutions

²⁵ North East Vision 2020, published by Ministry of DoNER.

in place. The only way to put in place an inclusive growth mechanism is to rope in these institutions.

Devolution below the state level also has its limitations. State does not transfer enough funds to the local bodies. So leaving the function of inclusion to the state is not enough. The NEC which is not essentially a political body ensure effective devolution of funds by directly reaching out to local bodies. It can also supervise the process of devolution. But right now there is no such provision. This stops the democratising at grass root level. And all claims of Indian government of putting in place inclusive governance through planning which is not dovetailed till the lowest level will stop short of ensuring a grass root level democracy.

Even at the regional level, inclusion is limited as only Chief Ministers and Governors are given membership. If membership is opened to MPs and MLAs, then the Council will become more broad based. Funds that flow out of the Council then are completely at the discretion of the state. As funding is politically motivated, many backward areas may be left out furthering their backwardness as political parties in power will favour constituencies led by their party members. The Council also has to co-ordinate amongst the states at this level. But the Council has failed to bring states to terms with each other in issues like the Ranganadi Project. While Arunachal insists on finishing the project, in Assam there is a huge opposition from civil society organisations pointing to the ill effects of this power project on Assam.

Arunachal has the highest untapped hydel power potential but an unchecked exploitation of this potential puts the other states in difficult situation. States like Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim are signing MoUs with private players to undertake power projects bypassing the NEC. While NEC emphasises on Small Hydro Power Projects, the states are undertaking mega dams not accepting the impact that it will have on neighbouring states. Although NEC provides a platform to give voice to the grievances of the states, it has not put into place any mechanism to address this gap. States in the NEC meetings point out that whenever ministries are asked about specific policies with regard to the north east, the response is dismissive.²⁶ This is worsened

²⁶ 61st plenary meeting of NEC, minutes accessed at http://megplanning.gov.in/programmes/Final_Proceedings_61_NEC_Meeting.pdf on 25th May, 2013.

because NEC merely provides the platform but lacks any supervisory power to lead the negotiations and solve deadlocks. States are not bound by advices of NEC. This shows how devolution of power through NEC seems like meaningless.

The present Development and Security Scenario

The Northeastern region is known to suffer from persistent underdevelopment and growing insurgency. Even after four decades of the functioning of NEC, its twin goals of providing development and ensuring security of the region has not been reached in the real sense. The development in the region is highly influenced by external factors and initiated by exogenous factors as well.²⁷ The tendency is to start mega projects and not projects that can rope in the service of local people. The centre is more concerned to make the projects look ambitious on paper irrespective of how feasible it is on ground. The region despite being hailed as rich in resources and a bio-diversity hotspot continues to be lagging behind the other regions of the country in terms of development. The backwardness of the region which continues to persist owes to its chequered history and faulty policies. Historically the resources and not the people of the region have been important and it continues to be the same.²⁸ Hence the model of development has been extractive in nature which prioritises what the region can do for the country.

According to World Bank, there is a low level of equilibrium of poverty, non development, civil conflict and a lack of faith in political leadership.²⁹ Owing to the nature of demography in the region and the scale of required infrastructural up gradation, infrastructural development will be associated with socio-political issues like land acquisition. This will lead to displacement of tribal people. Proper compensation may be the solution but in that case economic development will have to bypass the protectionism that the indigenous people of the region enjoy.

Development in the region is overdetermined by the security concerns of the centre. A developmental agency like NEC being put under a ministry overlooking law

²⁷ J B Ganguly, *Sustainable Human Development in the North Eastern Region of India*, p. 62.

²⁸ Bimal J Deb (ed.) (2002), *Development Priorities in the North East*, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi.

²⁹ "India's North East: Diversifying Growth Opportunities", Paper prepared by Indian Chamber of Commerce, accessed at http://www.pwc.in/en_IN/in/assets/pdfs/publications/2013/north-east_summit-2013.pdf on 23rd May, 2013.

and order and internal security, having initially only governors and not even chief ministers as members spell out that priority is still given to security and the top down approach of development that undermines democratically elected governments.³⁰ It also shows the failure of the region in resisting 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. As a result development from the very beginning worked within a very problematic perspective.

The present development status of the region points that agriculture still continues to be the primary source of livelihood accounting for 70% of the people. The pattern of agricultural growth has been uneven across the region and the states continue to be importers of foodgrains even for their own consumption. There is a lack of land availability for agriculture because of forest cover of the region which is about 66.1% as opposed to the national average of 21.1%. Accounting for 8% of the area of the country, the region has only 3.4% land available for agriculture and its contribution to total agricultural production is only 2.8%.³¹ The land holdings are small, irrigation covers a very small area and agricultural inputs are also inefficient leading to a lower production.

Roads density in the region is higher than the national average. Still there is a deficit of all weather roads and transport and communication is far from developed. The solution for development has been different from different corners. While government and some scholars support opening up of the region to free market forces, private investment and even international finances, some scholars from the region feel that free competition will further impact adversely the fragile economy of the region and the indigenous people will be left worse off. The region has always suffered from the feeling that the major industries and plantations are owned by outsiders. The profit flies out of the region. Because of the law and order situation private investment also shies away from the region. The government through its Look East Policy plans to tap on the

³⁰ When NEC was formed, it was under Ministry of Home Affairs. It continued to be till the formation of DoNER in 2004.

³¹ Data taken from paper prepared by Indian Chamber of Commerce and presented in their summit on the North East, 2013.

region's locational advantage by using it as a gateway to South East Asia. In the DoNER Vision 2020, there is a lot of emphasis on opening up the region for border trade, making the Northeast a free trade zone etc. The protectionist regime is also blamed for the backwardness of the regime. Too much emphasis on cultural factors has been at the cost of economic development.³² Neo classical model assumes that all the regions will develop equally when there is no institutional barrier to the flow of goods and people from one region to another. The special status of the Northeastern states provided by the Constitution's Article 371 onwards and systems like Inner Line Permit acts as an impediment to such path of development.

The emphasis on border trade is misplaced as the region right now has nothing to contribute to it. The region with low level of infrastructure can at best be a transit point to the trade corridor. Opening up the region to private investment from outside will adversely affect the sustainable development of the region. To encourage private investment, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry declared the region a Special Economic Zone with heavy subsidy and tax exemption available to the investors in the region. But SEZs are known for labour law violations. In the region the labourers have already been hit by divisive policy. Often at the receiving end of nativist chauvinism, the tea plantation labourers who are not Assamese speakers are stigmatised as outsiders. Being Hindi speakers or tribals from other part of India, they were the target of ULFA's violence against outsiders. As a result the labour question is reduced to their identity related issues and does not rope in informalisation and absence of labour rights. For the state and the plantation owners, divisive ethnic policy seems better than demand for higher wages.

Private capital also may reproduce the vicious circle of backwardness. But states of the region competing with each other for attracting more investment will often indulge in local conflicts. Private investors will prefer areas with an already developed infrastructure. As a result more investment comparatively will be located in Assam. This will in turn again centralise development in sites which are already better off. This will subvert the objective of NEC. In the region marred by intra-regional development any investment will have to be aimed at producing a balanced development. As a result

³² Gulshan Sachdeva, "India's North East: Rejuvenating a Conflict Driven Economy".

the role of the government has to be pro-active. In the Northeast who makes a policy becomes important as the people's voices have often been left out of the policy paradigm. As opposed to Nehru's Tribal Panchsheel of letting people develop on their own lines, the basic outline of the plans is still decided by the Centre.³³

Thus on the developmental front, the achievements of the Council has been limited. The region although figures prominently in the policy initiatives of the Country, it continues to lag behind in terms of development. This points to a gap between what is needed by the region and what kind of policies are handed down to the region. Hence the Council's role is limited at the very beginning. The policy discourse which the Council is to put in place is incapable of serving the region. As a result the funds that the Council channelizes to the region have failed to initiate development on a larger scale.

The issue of development is made more complicated because of the security situation in the region. While for some it is the absence of development that leads to insurgency, for others it is the insurgency that thwarts any developmental initiative in the region. The region was marked by separatist and insurgent movements since independence. Owing to long duration of exclusion subjected by the British Government, these areas which were outside the ambit of national movement did not relate to the newly formed Indian nation. They saw their merger with India as unjust.³⁴ Demands of insurgent groups varied from secession to autonomy to right of self determination. The violent outbursts of the insurgent outfits must be understood as a response to absence of space for political participation.³⁵

Most insurgent and secessionist outfits indulged into an unnecessary romanticisation of erstwhile kingdoms. ULFA talked about Ahom Kings and NSCN talked about Naga Chiefdoms. These outfits initially enjoyed a tacit support of the people. ULFA was a state of mind. Even government officials were sympathetic to these young men. But law and order situation being unfavourable for the Nehruvian projects of modernisation, the region was economically alienated also. The situation

³³ J B Ganguly, *Sustainable Human Development in the North Eastern Region of India*, p. 69.

³⁴ M S Prabhakara, "The North Eastern Council: Some Political Perspectives".

³⁵ Sidra Tariq, "Problems in North East India: A Case Study of Nagaland", *Institute of Regional Studies*, p.2.

was worsened by Indira Gandhi's imposition of election in 1983.³⁶ Post Assam Accord of 1985, nothing changed for the state. The region is still insurgency ridden.

The genuine aspirations of tribal population who wanted separate states from Assam were treated as secessionists. As a result the Centre came down heavily with counter-insurgency mechanisms. Instead of acknowledging the grievances of this region which was merged with India on condition of utmost autonomy and which saw a highly Hobbesian state rule, the centre psyche towards the region did not change. The Central Government never apologised for the air strike on Mizo people. The centre's response to the region in terms of counterinsurgency solutions put in place a militaristic paradigm. In fact militarisation and ethnic confrontation still decides the parameters of public policy. Political strategy in the Northeast is coercion, co-option and corruption of political processes. It only encourages politics of exclusion and retribution.³⁷

The solution being militaristic in Northeast region puts in place how centre views the people of the region. Army is well equipped to fight the enemy but not the malcontent citizens.³⁸ The deployment of army in the region under AFSPA, clarified the heavy handedness of the centre towards the people. The excesses of human rights in Manipur under AFSPA speak out volumes of how India's counterinsurgency methods in Northeast have failed on many fronts. Counterinsurgency measures in the region have been reactionary rather than conciliatory in nature. Because of fear of *domino effect* the government does not give concession to long term insurgent outfits like NSCN while the region is clamouring for peace.

Development policies are prepared within the paradigm of security. This explains why a developmental agency like NEC was placed under MHA and was entrusted with a security provision. Although NEC claims to not have undertaken any such security policy, there are allegations of NEC involving paramilitary agencies in a clandestine manner under the aegis of statutory provisions.

³⁶ Sunil Nath, "Assam: The Secessionist Insurgency and the Freedom of Minds", *Faultlines*, Vol 13, 2002, accessed at <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume13/Article2.htm> on 15th May, 2013.

³⁷ Sanjay Barbora (2006), "Rethinking India's Counter Insurgency Campaign in North East", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 41 No 35, p. 3805.

³⁸ M S Prabhakara (2007), "Assam Updating the Past", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 42 No 4.

The problem with such a provision is that it sends out the message that development in the region is still determined by the security concerns of the nation. Most policies are for the Indian nation. The Look East Policy and the initiatives for the region that followed are all responses to the needs of the larger nation. Scholars are on both side of the debate. While people like B P Singh put the blame of underdevelopment on the region's inability to cope with changes in administration, for Gulshan Sachdeva the problem is too much emphasis on cultural specificity of the region and excessive protectionism in place.³⁹ They want liberalisation to open up the region to outsiders with ensured free passage of labour and capital along with stronger incentive for private investment in the region. Shukla Committee Report submitted in 1997 states about the myth that the region can continue to live in isolation.⁴⁰

The development and security question in the region seems to be intertwined. The geographical location of the region is such that economies of hills and valleys are closely connected. As the gateway to the region is through Assam, the security scenario in the valley decides how things will be in the hills. Insurgent's violent attacks are often targeted against oil and petroleum as they symbolize the income going out of the region. But such attacks also hamper the region. The insurgents' opposition to outsiders forecloses the flow of ideas, capital and skilled labour from outside the region.⁴¹ The kind of policies that the centre undertakes leaves out the people from the most backward areas. Tertiary sector led development and a few sparse industrial set ups leave the majority population out of the ambit of developmental initiatives. As a result the people have no incentive to co-operate with the government. The law and order situation should be understood as people are expressing their grievances against such a socio-political structure in which they have little share in policy making and from which they do not benefit.⁴²

The question of development is incomplete if it does not cover what development does for the human beings. In India National Human Development Report of 2001 by

³⁹ Gulshan Sachdeva, "India's North East: Rejuvenating a Conflict Driven Economy"

⁴⁰ Transforming the North East, High Level Commission Report to the Prime Minister, Planning Commission.

⁴¹ P R Bhattacharjee and Purushottam Nayak "Vicious Circle of Insurgency and Underdevelopment in North East India" accessed at www.dspace.nehu.ac.in on 20th May, 2013.

⁴² Ibid.

Planning Commission and Gendering Human Development Indices of 2009 of Ministry of Women and Child Welfare tried to assess this. The DoNER Ministry did the same for the Northeast in 2011.⁴³ The report states some interesting facts. While there is a belief that Northeast is doing better than the rest of India, within the region there is disparity. There are a large number of anaemic women, percentage of school dropouts is high despite literacy rate being better than other parts of the country. Based on the performance of the states, they can be divided into two groups: the first one comprises of Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur and Sikkim which are doing better. The other group comprises of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura which are comparatively not doing well. There is a yawning gap between urban and rural areas of the region in terms of HDI. Gender disparity is also worsening in the region and the situation has deteriorated in Nagaland.⁴⁴

The developmental policies have failed to curb intra-regional imbalances. In an extremely diverse region like the Northeast, if inter group equity cannot be ensured by policy initiatives, development effort will be thwarted by social revolt. Conventional development model of large scale industrialisation may bypass the indigenous population. To ensure this does not happen, traditional industries should be rejuvenated and connected with markets to make them economically viable opportunities. The region which has been subjected to alienation should put in place a federal principle which will guide the relationship between the state and local bodies. All groups should be given the opportunity to have a say in decision making. To enhance development in the region, the Central government set up the Ministry of Development of North Eastern region. No other region had any such institution. This showed a greater political attention for this region.

Limitations of DoNER

The up-gradation of DoNER from a Department for the Development of the North Eastern Region under MHA to a separate Ministry in 2004 was seen as something unique. For the first time a particular region had a separate Ministry for its

⁴³ Human Development Report of North East States published by MDoNER.

⁴⁴ Purushottam Nayak (2009), *Growth and Human Development in North East India*, OUP, New Delhi.

development. This step was taken as the government's initiative to take the opinion of the people from the region in policy processes as opposed to coercive and hardline policies being imposed from above. But this Ministry has few limitations that stop it from delivering what is expected from it. The Ministry is not given overall responsibility of the region, rather it is the nodal ministry only for the NEC. The other duties of DoNER are looking after the Non Lapsable Central Pool of Resources, development of infrastructure and implementation of special economic packages sanctioned for individual states.⁴⁵ But such a body like DoNER which has to look into too many issues deprives the region of the expert guidance of nodal ministries like Power and Water Resources. There is a possibility of duplication of efforts between NEC and DoNER. DoNER also operates from Delhi which is far off from the region and instead of bringing governance closer to the people, it takes it further away. The second ARC report actually mentioned abolishing the Ministry and restoring nodal status to the Council. The NAC recommendations also mentioned that instead of having a separate ministry for the region, every ministry should have a separate North East Plan and policy norms should be relaxed to accommodate the region.

Conclusion

Hence taking an account of the working of the Council brings to the fore a number of issues. Although the idea behind setting up the Council had the potential of addressing the persisting underdevelopment of the region, a number of limitations stopped it from doing the same. It starts with its advisory nature which leaves the possibility that the states can bypass the Council. The execution of projects is not supervised by the Council leading to delays in completion. While the Council was aimed to move away from bureaucratic planning in Delhi, it puts in place a bureaucratic planning in Shillong which continues to give no space to the local people. The reason for limitation of the Council is that the guidelines of how it should function are still laid down by the Centre. The Council fell short of reinventing the region as something different from a frontier. The policies continue to be heavily determined by the region's strategic location sidelining the condition of the people. Instead of opening up participation to people at the regional level through proper decentralisation and

⁴⁵ 2nd Administrative Reforms Committee Report, Government of India, 2008.

devolution, the Council prioritises the centre's perspective of the region. The Council did not do much to change the power relation between the Centre and the States.

Conclusion

The North Eastern Council was a new experiment of the Government of India. It put in place a third tier of planning in the region. This was to account for the special need of the region which came to be prominent after the reorganisation of the Northeast. The reorganisation led to the formation of new smaller states in the region. These erstwhile partially excluded areas were not very developed. After independence they were made parts of the state of Assam. The Inner Line Permit system which restricted the movement of outsiders in the hills kept the hill and plains people from uniting with each other. The hill tribes were always aware of their distinct and different identity. Hence a feeling of alienation led the hill tribe people demand for separate states and the right to statehood. Various measures like greater autonomy within the state of Assam failed to satisfy their demands. A number of movements started in the Northeast voicing the demand for reorganisation of the region. This led to the formation of Nagaland in 1963 and the region was finally divided into seven states.

The newly formed smaller states which were already lagging behind in terms of development did not seem to be economically viable units. To ensure balanced development of the region, the North Eastern Council was established in 1971. The Council's function is to ensure an integrated, co-ordinated development of the region. Its aim is to ensure both intra-regional and inter-regional balanced development. As the region needed investment for infrastructural development, the Council aims to provide for it at a regional level. However when the Council was formed, it was seen as a continued presence of the centre in a strategically important region. As it was to be headed by a Governor, it was also seen as an agent of centre, a supra-state which may undermine the democratically elected state governments.

The Council was entrusted to oversee both development and security question in the region. The Council's function includes dovetailing the central and state plans at the regional level to avoid overlapping and promote efficient planning, formulating regional plans and taking up policies which will benefit one or more states in the region. The Council also functions as the nodal agency when it comes to funding policies in the region. Funds are made available to the Council and on the basis of periodic review the Council makes funds available to the projects. The Council has been functioning since

the last four decades and it undertook a number of projects aimed at the development of the region.

The North Eastern Council was a departure from the Zonal Councils as it did more than merely provide a platform to the states of a particular region. While the Zonal Council was to check too much statism, the North Eastern Council was more accommodative of the diversity of the region. Although the Council was made an advisory body, it has functioned well to bring into a regional perspective. The Northeast as a unit of planning may have limitations owing to internal diversities. Within the region there can be clear gap between the states with regard to their level of development and their specific needs. The kind of agriculture practised in the hills is different from that practised in the plains. But even then the overall level of development and the similar topography makes it possible to have some policies for the entire region. The Council since its inception has undertaken a number of policies to usher in development in the region. Its two pronged aims are to ensure development and security of the region.

The Council initiates policies under headings like Transport and Communication, Manpower Development, Industries etc. It has funded a number of roads, bridges etc in the region. But even after four decades of its functioning the scenario of the region has not changed in terms of development and security. The region continues to lag behind the other parts of India in terms of development. The Human Development Index within the region is also not very high. In this light I studied the Council's function. The Council did not change the ground level scenario in the region.

There are a number of limitations that the Council suffers from. The Council is an advisory body and its suggestions are not binding on the government. The Council in terms of its composition has a rather narrow base as it leaves out representatives from Scheduled Areas. It has a very restricted representation. Membership is restricted to only Chief Ministers and Governors of the states. The representatives of Autonomous District Councils which cover a fairly large part of the region are left outside the ambit of NEC. Although the Council is to provide a platform for the states to have a dialogue in case of clash of interests, there is a tendency of the states to bypass the Council. A number of association formed often sideline the Council. The yearly meetings and the

sectoral summits of the Council provides a platform to check where the centre's policies do not include the region. But it stops at that. The Council provides a feedback mechanism to forward the grievances of the region to the centre but cannot ensure that they are taken up on time. The response from the centre is often not on time.

The Council's policies focus excessively on infrastructural development and most of its funding is under this heading. But the region continues to be heavily dependent on agriculture and a major portion of population earns their livelihood from agriculture. Funding is always inadequate for agriculture. As a result, agriculture suffers. The standard explanation of why financial packages have not developed the region greatly is the low absorptive capacity of the region. The problem is reduced to bottlenecks at the implementation level. But the exclusion at the level of formulation of policies is not focussed upon a lot. One cannot deny the problems at the implementation level either. The Council is not a supervisory body. The execution of the policies is outside the ambit of the region. This leads to a time and cost overrun. But the Council can intervene at the formulation level. However its status as an advisory body limits its power at that level also.

After the establishment of DoNER the Council's functions increased. But DoNER denied the region the services of other nodal ministries. The NEC has to oversee the security scenario also and review the security policies from time to time. For this it reports to the Ministry of Home Affairs. An institution which is concerned with the development of the region having such a function points out to the continued mediation of development by security concerns. The very presence of such a provision points out to the paradigm of securitised development that scholars have pointed to. The Council did not move away from such a paradigm. It continued to function as an agency to ensure the law and order situation is under control hoping this in turn will encourage private investment in the region and hence develop the region. So the assumption was that development will follow stability. But scholars have pointed out that persistent underdevelopment and lack of employment opportunities makes it easier for insurgent groups to recruit more members and continue to carry on their activities in the region. Instead of waiting for insurgency to stop and then initiate development in the region, it has to go hand in hand. Development and employment opportunities can give the people

of the region an alternative to violent movements. Peace and stability will be an outcome of development.

Although this council was supposed to put in place a decentralised process of planning and lead to meaningful devolution of power to the region, it did not fulfil these aspirations. The Northeastern region has often complained of alienation and exclusion. This Council was meant to put in place a method of accommodation whereby the stakeholders who are the people of the region will get more voice in terms of governance. Empowering the already marginalised people is crucial because many parts of the region are left outside the ambit of Panchayati Raj Institutions. Question of inclusion becomes very crucial in a region that has often felt excluded. Instead of PRIs the region has Autonomous District Councils. The functions of these Councils have been less than satisfactory. In such a scenario, the Council can bring inclusive governance to these people to ensure inclusive growth. But the Council has no provision for accommodating representation of areas left outside PRIs.

The Council should have given a platform to the people of the region to voice their grievances with regard to ambitious plans of the Centre for the region. They may be in terms of big dams which lead to displacement or in terms of opening the borders for international trade under the Look East Policy. But instead of giving voice to the people of the region the Council upheld the official position of the state governments of the region. The people continued to be excluded. The technocratic and bureaucratic make up of the Council fails to put in place creative and innovative solutions for the region's problems.

In the light of these shortcomings, it seems that devolution of power in the region has been of a cosmetic nature. A Council which has the potential to do a lot is put in place but stripped of any real power. Such a Council can put in place an inclusive and empowering institutional mechanism of governance. The region with a low rate of development and law and order disturbances can use this Council to understand the root causes of the problem. But this has not been done. The Council gives voice to the political representatives of the region regarding their grievances, but cannot make sure that the centre relooks at the policies which tend to exclude the region.

Thus there is a gap between what is expected of the Council, what it has been empowered to do and what it is doing. Until and unless this gap is closed the Council will continue to fall short of putting in place a meaningful decentralised mechanism at the regional level which will ensure that the region's concerns are not sidelined anymore. It has to provide a channel of dialogue between the centre and the region regarding crucial issues like the consequences of border trade, the security situation in Manipur under AFSPA and the human rights violation taking place. But at present the Council is not more than a token representation of the region in the policy formulating agencies of the centre whose advices can easily be bypassed.

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APPENDIX 1

(THE ASSAM OFFICIAL LANGUAGE ACT, 1960)

(As amended upto 10th November, 1967)

An Act

To declare the official language of the state of Assam

Whereas Article 345 of the Constitution provides that the Legislature of a state may be law adopt any one or more of the languages in use in the state as the language to be used for official purposes of the state and for matters hereinafter appearing:

It is hereby enacted in the Eleventh year of the Republic of India, as follows:

1.(A) This Act may be called The Assam Official Act, 1960

(B) It extends to the whole of the state of Assam.

(C) It shall come into force on such date as the state government may , by notification in the Official Gazetteer, appoint and different dates may be appointed for different official purposes and for different parts of the State of Assam.

Provided that the date or dates appointed by the State Government in respect of any of the parts of the state of Assam shall not be later than ten years from the date of assent to this act is first published in the Official Gazette.

2. In this Act, unless there is anything repugnant in the subject or context:-

(a) "Autonomous District" means an area deemed as such under paragraph 1(1) of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India.

(b) "Autonomous Region" means an area deemed as such under paragraph 1(2) of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India.

(c) "District Council" means a District Council constituted under paragraph 2 of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India.

(d) deleted

(e) deleted

(f) "Prescribe" means prescribed by rules made under this Act.

(g) "Regional Council" means a Regional Council constituted under paragraph 2 of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India.

3. Without prejudice to the provisions of Article 346 and 347 of the Constitution of India and subject as hereinafter provided, Assamese shall be used for all or any of the official purposes of the State of Assam.

Provided that the English language, so long as the use thereof is permissible (for the official purposes of the Union under any law made by the Parliament in this behalf) and thereafter Hindi in place of English, shall also be used for such official purposes of the Secretariat and the offices of the Heads of the Departments of the State Government and in such matter as may be prescribed.

Provided further that—

(a) All ordinances promulgated under Article 213 of the Constitution of India.

(b) All acts passed by the State Legislature

(c) All Bills to be introduced or amendments thereto be moved in the State Legislature and

(d) All Orders, Regulations, Rules and Bye Laws issued by the State Government under the Constitution of India or any law made by Parliament or the legislature of the State shall be published in the official gazette in the Assamese language.

4. Notwithstanding anything in section 3, only languages which are in use immediately before the commencement of this Act shall continue to be used for administrative and other official purposes upto and including the level of the Autonomous region and the Autonomous District, as the case may be, until the Regional Council or the District Council, in respect of the Autonomous Region or the Autonomous District, as the case may be, by a majority of not less than two-thirds of the members present and voting decide in favour of adoption of any other language for any of the administrative or official purposes within that region or district.

5. Without prejudice to the provisions contained in Section 3, the Bengali language shall be used for administrative and other official purposes upto and including the district level in the District of Cachar.

6. Notwithstanding anything in Section 3, any examination held by the Assam Public Service Commission which immediately before the commencement of this Act used to be conducted in the English language shall continue to be so conducted till such time as the use thereof is permissible (for the official purposes of the Union under any law made by the Parliament in this behalf).

Provided that a candidate shall have the right to choose the language in use in the State of Assam, which was the medium of his University examination.

7. Subject to the provisions of this Act, the State Government may by notification issued from time to time, direct the use of the language as may be specified in the notification and in such parts of the State of Assam as may be specified therein:

Provided that:

- (a) The right of the various linguistic groups in respect of medium of instruction in educational institutions as laid down in the Constitution of India shall not be affected;
- (b) The State shall not, in granting aid to educational and cultural institutions, discriminate against any such institution on grounds of language;
- (c) The rights to appointments in the Assam Public Services and to contract and other advocations shall be maintained without discrimination on the grounds of language; and
- (d) In regard to noting in the offices in the region or district if any member of the staff is unable to note in any of the district language, the use of English shall be permitted by the Heads of Departments so long as the use thereof is permissible (for the official purposes of the Union under any law made by the Parliament in this behalf).

8. (1) The State Government shall have the power to make rules for carrying out the purposes of the Act.

(2) Every rule made under this section shall be laid as soon as may be after it is made, before the Assam Legislative Assembly while it is in Session for a total period of fourteen days which may be comprised in one session or in two successive sessions, and if, before the expiry of the session in which it is so laid or the session immediately following, the Assam Legislative Assembly agree in making any modification in the rule or the Assam Legislative Assembly agree that the rule should not be made, the rule shall thereafter have effect only in such modified form or be of no effect, as the case may be; so, however that any such modification or annulment shall be without prejudice to the validity of anything previously done under that rule.

APPENDIX 2

THE NORTH EASTERN COUNCIL ACT, 1971

(Act No.84 of 1971)

An Act

to provide for the setting up of a Council for the North-eastern areas of India to be called the North Eastern Council and for matters connected therewith.

Be it enacted by Parliament in the Twenty-second year of the Republic of India as follows:

1. Short title and commencement –

- i. This Act may be called the North Eastern Council Act, 1971.
- ii. It shall come into force on such date, being a date not earlier than the day appointed under clause (b) of section 2 of the North-Eastern Areas (Re-organization) Act, 1971, as the Central Government may, by notification in the official Gazette, appoint.

2. Definitions – In this Act unless the context other-wise requires,

- a. "*Council*" means the North Eastern Council set up under Section 3;
- b. "*North Eastern Areas*" means the area comprising the States of Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Tripura and the Union Territories of Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram; and
- c. "*State*" include the Union Territories of Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram.

3. Setting up and composition of the North Eastern Council.

(1) There shall be a Council to be called the North Eastern Council which shall consist of the following members, namely:

- a. The person or persons for the time being holding the office of the Governor of States or the office of Administrator of the Union Territories in the North-eastern areas;
- b. The Chief Ministers of the States of Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Tripura and of the Union Territory of Mizoram; and
- c. One of the Counsellors to the Administrators of the Union Territory of Arunachal Pradesh appointed under Section 18 of the North-East Frontier Agency (Administration) Supplementary Regulation, 1971, to be nominated by the Administration:

Provided that if there is no Council of Ministers in any State referred to in clause (b) or in the Union Territory referred to in that clause; the President may

nominate not more than one person to represent such State or Union Territory in the Council for so long as there is no Council of Ministers in such State or Union Territory.

(2) Notwithstanding anything contained in sub-section (1), the President may, if he deems it necessary so to do, nominate a Union Minister to be a member of the Council.

(3) One of the members of the Council to be nominated by the President shall be the Chairman of the Council.

(4) The President may, if he deems it necessary so to do, nominate another member of the Council to act as Vice-Chairman of the Council.

4. Functions of the Council:

(1) The Council shall be an advisory body and may discuss any matter in which some or all of the States represented in that Council, or the Union and one or more of the States represented in that Council, have a common interest and advise the Central Government and the Government of each State concerned as to the action to be taken on any such matter, and in particular, may discuss and make recommendations with regard to:

- a. any matter of common interest in the field of economic and social planning;
- b. any matter concerning inter-State transport and communications;
- c. any matter relating to power or flood control projects of common interest.

(2) For securing the balanced development of the North-Eastern Areas, the Council shall forward proposals;

- i. formulating for the State represented in the Council a unified and co-ordinated regional plan (which will be in addition to the State Plan) in regard to matters of common importance to that area;
- ii. regarding the priorities of the projects and schemes included in the regional plan and the stages in which the regional plan may be implemented; and
- iii. regarding the location of the projects and schemes included in the regional plan, to the Central Government for its consideration.

(3) The Council shall –

- a. review, from time to time, the implementation of the projects and schemes included in the regional plan and recommend measures for effecting co-ordination among the Governments of the States concerned in the matter of implementation of such projects and schemes;
- b. where a project or scheme is intended to benefit two or more States, recommend the matter in which;

- i. such project or scheme may be executed or implemented and managed or maintained; or
- ii. the benefits there from may be shared, or
- iii. the expenditure thereon may be incurred;

c. on a review of progress of the expenditure, recommend to the Central Government the quantum of financial assistance to be given, from time to time, to the State or States entrusted with the execution or implementation of any project or scheme included in the regional plan;

d. recommend to the Government of the State concerned or to the Central Government the undertaking of necessary surveys and investigation of projects in any State represented in the Council to facilitate consideration of the feasibility of including new projects in the regional plan.

(4) The Council shall review from time to time the measures taken by the States represented in the Council for the maintenance of Security and public order therein and recommend to the Governments of the States concerned further measures necessary in this regard.

5. Meetings of the Council –

1. The Council shall meet at such time as the Chairman of the Council may appoint in this behalf and shall, subject to the other provisions of this section, observe such rules of procedure in regard to transaction of business at its meetings as it may lay down from time to time.

2. The Chairman or in his absence the Vice-Chairman, if any, or in the absence of both the Chairman and the Vice-Chairman, any other member chosen by the members present from amongst themselves, shall preside at a meeting of the Council.

3. The proceedings of every meeting of the Council shall be forwarded to the Central Government and also to the Government of each State represented on the Council.

6. Nomination of Certain Officers to attend the meeting of the Council.

In order to assist the Council in the discharge of its functions, each of the Ministries of the Central Government dealing with matters relating to Defence, Finance, Home Affairs and Planning shall nominate an officer to attend the meetings of the Council.

7. Officers and Staff of the Council.

1. The Council shall have a Secretariat staff consisting of a Secretary, a Planning Adviser, a Financial Adviser and a Security Adviser and such other officers and

employees as the Central Government may, by order, determine.

2. The Secretarial staff of the Council shall function under the direction, supervision and control of the Chairman of the Council.

3. The office of the Council shall be located at such place as may be determined by the Council.

4. The Administrative expenses of the said office, including the salaries and allowances payable to, or in respect of members of the Secretariat Staff of the Council, shall be borne by the Central Government out of the moneys provided by Parliament for the purpose.

8. Repeal – The North Eastern Council Act, 1970 (26 of 1970) is hereby repealed.

**THE GOVERNMENT OF UNION TERRITORIES (AMENDMENT) ACT,
1975 (Act 29 of 1975)**

Amendment of Act 84 of 1971 14. In the North Eastern Council Act, 1971, in Section 3, in Sub-section (1)

a. in clause (b), for the words " and of the Union Territory of Mizoram", the words "and of the Union Territories of Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram" shall be substituted;

b. clause (c) shall be omitted:

c. in the proviso, for the words, brackets and letter " in any State referred to in clause (b) or in the Union Territory referred to in that clause", the words brackets and letter "in any State or Union Territory referred to in clause (b)" shall be substituted.

Repeal of Regulation 4 of 1971 15. As from the commencement of the principal Act, in the union territory *Regulation* of Arunachal Pradesh, the North-East Frontier Agency (Administration) Supplementary Regulation, 1971 shall stand repealed.

APPENDIX 3
THE NORTH EASTERN COUNCIL (AMENDMENT) ACT, 2002
NO 68 OF 2002
(20TH DECEMBER, 2002)

An act further to amend the North Eastern Council Act, 1971.

Be it enacted in the Parliament in the fifty-third year of the Republic of India as follows:

Short title and commencement

1.(1) This act may be called the North Eastern Council (Amendment) Act, 2002.

(2) It shall come into force on such date as the Central Government may, by notification in the official gazette, appoint.

Amendment of section 2

2. In Section 2 of the North Eastern Council Act, 1971 (hereinafter referred to as the principal Act), in clause (b), for the words "Nagaland and Tripura", the words "Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura" shall be substituted.

Amendment of Section 3

3. In Section 3 of the principal Act,

(a) for subsection (1), the following sub-section shall be substituted, namely:

"(1) There shall be a Council to be called the North Eastern Council which shall consist of the following members, namely:-

- (i) The person or persons for the time being holding the office of the Governor of the States.
- (ii) The Chief Ministers of the state of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura;

Provided that, if there is no Council of Ministers in any state referred to clause (b), the President may nominate not more than one person to represent such state in the Council for so long as there is no Council of Ministers in such state;

(iii) Three members to be nominated by the President";

(b) for sub-section (3), the following sub-section shall be substituted, namely:-"(3) the President shall nominate the Chairman of the Council";

Amendment of Section 4

4. In Section 4 of the Principal Act-

(a) for sub-sections (1) and (2), the following sub-sections shall be substituted, namely:-

(1) the Council shall function as a regional planning body for the north eastern area,

(2) while formulating the regional plans for the north eastern area, the council shall give priority to the schemes or projects which will benefit two or more states:

Provided that in case of Sikkim, the Council shall formulate specific projects and schemes for the state including the review of implementation of such projects and schemes.”;

(b) in sub-section (3), clause (c) shall be omitted;

(c) after sub-section (4), the following sub-section shall be inserted, namely:

“(5) The Council shall have such power as may be delegated to it by the Central Government.”

Amendment of Section 5

5. In Section 5 of the principal act, in sub-section (1), for the words “The Council shall meet at such times”, the words “the Council shall meet at least twice a year at such times” shall be substituted.

Amendment of Section 6

6. In Section 6 of the Principal Act, for the words “and planning”, the words “Planning and the Department of Development of North Eastern Region” shall be substituted