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SOCIO-ECONOMIC RATIONALE OF A REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL FOR THE BARAK VALLEY OF ASSAM

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INTRODUCTION

Regional inequalities may assume different forms: social, political and economic. Inequalities call for specific intervention when they constitute problems. The need for intervention may be discussed either by reference to standards of equity or of efficiency or a judicious combination of both. The justification for regional policy rests on the imperfection of market mechanism operating in a spatial framework. Stilwell (1972) has remarked that an economic policy pertaining to regions must take note of the probable social and political consequences. It is this interdependence between economic, political and social issues that lends the regional planning much of its complexity.

Richardson (1969) opines that division of a country into planning regions is essential when questions of regional policy and planning arise. According to him, a planning region is an area over which economic decisions apply. But planning regions may be badly delimited if their boundaries do not conform to the boundaries of natural economic region. Moreover, optimal planning unit will vary according to the character of the problem under investigation. Some problems may be dealt with at village or block level, some other problems will require larger area planning and problems like transport development may need multi-state regional planning.

Gaining insight from the views of the economists referred to above, it is possible to use a flexible concept of the region and to go deeper into the specific problems of different parts of the multi-state macro region which is now in the policy focus in the name of North East India. It is not enough to distinguish between the problems of the political units which are known as status in the Indian Federal Framework, it is also essential to focus spotlight on the natural and socio-economic divisions of these states if we are to do full justice to the principles of regional planning.

Forwarding the principle of regionalization according to physiographic and socio-economic characteristics and peculiarity of problems, we have identified the Barak Valley as a distinct area in the state of Assam requiring special treatment at analytical and policy

spheres. Assam in the North Eastern Region consisting of 23 districts can be broadly divided into three zones namely, the *Brahmaputra Valley*, the area comprising two hill districts of *North Cachar Hills and Karbi Anglong*, and the *Barak Valley* consisting of the districts of Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj. These three regions of Assam are geographically, historically, socially and economically different from one another in many respects. The Barak Valley in particular, has all the characteristics of a problem region.

Stilwell (1972, p.10) has pointed out that there are three main types of problems areas: underdeveloped, depressed and congested. Barak Valley possesses the features of all these three types of problem regions. Firstly, it shares the common features of underdevelopment of the North East. Secondly, it is a depressed region in the sense that within the state of Assam it has suffered most owing to severance of its link with what is now known as Bangladesh as a result of partition of India. It is a demographically congested region as it has experienced unprecedented inflow of population from the erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and its towns and suburb have absorbed substantial quantum of middle class migration from the rest of the North Eastern Region owing to social tension.

In the following sections we have undertaken an exercise of analyzing the features of the Barak Valley in a comparative framework. We have also dealt with certain indicators of development in order to highlight the specific problems of this area which justify establishment of a separate planning authority for it at the sub-state level.

GEOGRAPHICAL FEATURES

The Barak Valley covers an area of 6222 sq. km. and is administratively divided into 27 Blocks, 321 Gaon Panchayats and 1050 Villages. The valley lies between longitude of $92^0 15'$ and $93^0 15'$ East and latitude of $24^0 8'$ and $25^0 8'$ North and geographically isolated not only from mainstream of India but also from the rest of the state of Assam owing to difficult topography of the adjoining areas. It is surrounded by other states of India viz., Tripura, Mizoram and Manipur and a long vulnerable international border with Bangladesh.

The topography of the valley is heterogeneous having hills, low lands and plain areas. The Barak-Surma-Kusiara river system passes through this valley. It is geographically the part of what was known as Surma Valley in pre-partition days consisting of the old districts of Sylhet (now included in Bangladesh) and Cachar. Of the Surma Valley, only Cachar and a part of Karimganj sub-division of Sylhet district forms the present Barak Valley deriving its

name from the main river, Barak. The valley is covered with a network of sluggish streams and saucer-like depressions. Numerous hillocks stand all over the valley. The valley is also covered by hill ranges from north, east and south. It has vast tracts of forest land in its southern side. The forest cover of the valley has been on the decline and the forest area decreased from 44.4 percent of the geographical area of the valley in 1951 to 34.9 percent in 1994-95.

The hilly terrain in the valley is used for tea plantation and the principal crops produced in the plain areas are rice, jute, sugarcane, potato, rape seed, mustard seed etc. About 90 percent of the gross cropped area is used for cultivation of rice and tea plantation.

The climatic condition of the valley is characterized high humidity to the extent of 89 percent. Average rainfall is as high as 2700 mm and the minimum and maximum annual rainfall have been noted to be 1700 mm and 4000 mm respectively. Consequently, the valley often experiences flood havoc. The air during the monsoon remains surcharged with moisture. The minimum and maximum temperature observed in the valley during winter and summer respectively are 8^0 C and 37^0 C.

The geographical features analysed above endow the valley a distinct regional identity leading to the justification of drawing up special programmes within the integrated development plans for Assam and North East India. The valley's unique geographically location makes it worthy of a nodal point in developing inter-state economic links and cooperation between Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Manipur (Goswami, 1994). The valley is also likely to play an important role in Indo-Bangladesh economic cooperation if economic ties are developed between the two countries.

DEMOGRAPHIC SCENARIO

According to 1991 Census report total population of the Barak Valley is 24.9 lakhs. Table 1 shows that its population is far above the population figures of many North Eastern States such as Mizoram (6.9 lakhs), Arunachal Pradesh (8.7 lakhs), Nagaland (12.1 lakhs), Meghalaya (17.8 lakhs) and Manipur (18.4 lakhs). Population trend in the Barak Valley as depicted in Table 2 shows an explosive growth rate since 1941. To have a comparative and clear idea of the growth of population in the Barak Valley, annual average growth rates of population for different decades have been estimated along with those of Brahmaputra Valley, Assam and India in Table 3. The data reveal that the valley during the five decades witnessed fluctuating growth rates of population. It had the highest demographic growth rate

of 2.23 percent per annum during 1941-51. This was marginally reduced to 2.13 percent in the decade, 1951-61. Again it increased to 2.20 percent in 1961-71 and further declined to 1.8 percent during the two decades of 1971-91 (Census was not conducted in 1981). Whereas the Barak Valley witnessed a decrease in the growth rate of population between 1941-51 and 1951-61, Brahmaputra Valley witnessed a substantial increase in population growth during the same span of time. Perhaps this can be explained by greater impact of inter-state migration to Brahmaputra Valley during this period. The trend was reversed in both the valleys between the decades 1951-61 and 1961-71. Assam as whole and Barak and Brahmaputra Valleys in particular, have witnessed higher growth rate of population than India as a whole in the post-partition era.

The real problem of population growth in the Barak Valley is highlighted if we look at the figures of density of population (Table 4). It is found that density of population of the Barak Valley has always been greater than that of the Brahmaputra Valley, Assam and India since 1941. Moreover, the density of population in the Barak Valley has increased from 129 per sq. km. in 1941 to 360 per sq. km. in 1991. This rise in the density of population has created grave economic problems in the form of overcrowding of agriculture in this industrially backward area. The conclusion that emanates from the discussion is that although Assam as a whole has witnessed a rapid demographic transition since 1941, the problem of population growth is more acute in the Barak Valley.

AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

The economy of the Barak Valley is predominated by agriculture and allied sectors. More than 58 percent of the total working population in the valley is either cultivators or agricultural labourers and 70.7 percent of its workers earn their livelihood from the primary sector activities according to 1991 Census. But agriculture is already overcrowded. Table 5 shows that only 30.9 percent of the total geographical area in the valley constitutes its net sown area against 41.6 percent in the State of Assam. This means that the Barak Valley suffers from relative scarcity of cultivable land. In the consequence, Barak Valley is constrained to feed as any as 8277 persons per 1000 hectares of cultivable land. The corresponding figures for the Brahmaputra Valley and the State of Assam are 6445 and 6567 respectively whereas the all-India figure is 4305. Added to the scarcity of cultivable land in the valley is its inadequate progress in intensive farming. The ratio of gross cropped area to net sown area in the valley works out to 1.25 whereas it is 1.29 in the Brahmaputra Valley

and 1.28 in Assam. Low intensity of cropping in the Barak Valley is mainly owing to poor irrigation facilities. Hardly 6.4 percent of the net sown area in the Barak Valley have irrigation facilities compared 18.3 percent in the Brahmaputra Valley, 17.3 percent in Assam and 32.5 percent in India. Irrigation facilities in the Barak Valley are also less assured as these are mainly devised at individual farmers' level.

It goes to the credit of the farmers of the Barak Valley that in spite of serious limitations in irrigation, they have succeeded in bringing about 48 percent of the net sown area under HYV. But introduction of HYV crops cannot achieve its full impact on productivity and crop intensity because of lack of irrigation facilities. As chemical fertilizers have complementary relation with irrigation as inputs, the valley's progress in the application of chemical fertilizers is also retarded. Per hectare consumption of fertilizer in the Barak Valley is as low as 16.4 kg in great contrast to India's 69.9 kg. Consequently, average yield of rice per hectare in the valley is as low as 1447 kg as against India's figure of 1745 kg. Significantly enough, the relevant figure of the Brahmaputra Valley the most fertile region of Assam is only 1131 kg. i.e., lower than that of the Barak Valley.

The first generation problem of the green revolution has been to induce farmers to adopt the new technology to raise production (Ghatak, 1995). It seems that the Barak Valley has been able to effectively solve this problem but it is still unable reap the benefits of the green revolution because of the serious infrastructural deficiency in the form of irrigation facility. It may be added that average yield of rice in the Barak Valley during the period from 1950-51 to 1973-74 has been higher than that India. It is only after 1973-74 that the valley has been lagging behind the average of India. This only highlights uneven regional impact of the green revolution to the disadvantage of regions like the Barak Valley owing to disparity infrastructural development.

The upshot of the above discussion is that the Barak Valley requires a special pattern of State intervention in agriculture. This is only possible through area specific agricultural planning.

INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT

As is well known, Assam is an industrially backward State. The position of the Barak Valley in respect of the State efforts for industrialization is extremely unsatisfactory. There

are 13 industrial estates in Assam of which only one (Badarpur Industrial Estate) is located in the Barak Valley. In Assam, 13 industrial estates with 226 sheds have been constructed and 26 percent of them are non-functioning. In contrast of the 29 sheds constructed in the Barak Valley, the overwhelming majority of 69 percent of the sheds are non-functioning. Again, there are 7 growth centers established in Assam for industrial development, but none of them are located in the Barak Valley (Govt. of Assam, 1994).

Consequently, even after 50 years of freedom the industrial base of the valley has remained extremely narrow. Industrial units in the valley mostly belong to either food products or wood and wood products. Number of factories per lakh of population is only 7.1 in the Barak Valley against 12.7, 11.9, and 13.3 in the Brahmaputra Valley, Assam and India respectively (Table 6).

In the case of small-scale industries, the situation in the Barak Valley is still worse. This is evident from the fact that number of small-scale units in the Barak Valley is only 61 in contrast to Brahmaputra Valley's 88 and India's 246.

Tea plantation is the prime organised industry of the Barak Valley but it is in a state of sickness and neglect. Average yield of tea has been quite low in the valley. Even as the Brahmaputra Valley gardens are able to produce 1836 kg of tea per hectare, the Barak Valley produces only 1150 kg. The relevant for India is 1794 kg. Low productivity of the Barak Valley gardens can be largely explained by lack of investment in them out of the surplus earned by the tea planters. This is proved by the fact that in the Barak Valley gardens, a large number of tea bushes have become too old and non-yielding, and still they are not replaced by new bushes.

The industrial scenario in the Barak Valley as explained briefly in this section also goes to point out the need for regional planning in this area in order to achieve breakthrough. It may be pointed out that a paper mill established in the valley in the medium-scale sector is facing serious difficulties and a sugar mill has proved to b non-starter. New initiatives are therefore, necessary with a careful survey of the development potential of the area. This is only possible if an area-specific planning body is established for this valley.

INFRASTRUCTURAL DEVELOPMENT

The North Eastern Region is proverbially handicapped in infrastructure development. The situation in the Barak Valley is all the more dismal in this regard. The valley is

connected with a precarious railway link with meter gauge lines that are ill-maintained, providing extremely unsatisfactory service to commuters and goods traffic. Consequently, railways are yielding place to road transport in the valley.

Unfortunately even the road transport is handicapped by inadequate development and poor maintenance of roads. Surfaced road length per lakh of population in the Barak Valley is 16.9 km compared to 31.9 km in the Brahmaputra Valley and 118.3 km in India. Similarly, surfaced road length per 100 sq. km in the Barak Valley is as low as 6.1 km against 10.8 km in the Brahmaputra Valley and 30.5 km in India. The relative position of the Barak Valley in regard to total road length (surfaced and un-surfaced) is equally unsatisfactory.

It may also be noted that one cannot get the real picture of the road situation in the Barak Valley from the statistics relating to surfaced roads. The so-called surfaced roads have been reduced to the condition of un-surfaced ones owing to disrepair in many stretches. Poor condition of roads has led not only to difficulties faced by the commuters but this has also increased the fuel and maintenance cost of vehicles. There have been popular movements against this neglect of roads in the valley. Poor condition of roads has also adverse implication for number of vehicles plying through these roads. It is estimated that there are only 793 vehicles per lakh of population in the Barak Valley against 1226 in the Brahmaputra Valley and 3350 in India (Table 7). Thus, both in the spheres of railways and roads, a substantial big-push are necessary if the valley is to experience any meaningful development.

The backwardness of the economy of the Barak Valley is also reflected in the sphere of institutional savings and credit. Table 7 shows that per capita bank deposit in the Barak Valley is as low as Rs.857 lagging much behind the figures of Rs.1075 in the Brahmaputra Valley and Rs.2954 in India. This means that people in the Barak Valley have lower capacity to save indicating lower per capita income if we assume that there is no significant difference in marginal propensity to save.

Moreover, a per capita bank advance in the valley is Rs.330 compared to Rs.548 in the Brahmaputra Valley and Rs.1580 in India. There seems to be a substantial outflow of fund from the valley owing to absorption even in a state of low per capita savings. Credit-backed economic activities seem to be at an extremely low-level in the backdrop of backwardness in both agriculture and industry. This view is confirmed by lower credit-deposit ratio in the Barak Valley vis-à-vis the Brahmaputra valley and India as a whole.

The problem indicated by the existence of low rate of savings and at the same time low credit-deposit ratio cannot be addressed simply by expansion of banking in the valley. The malady requires to be tackled by a much more comprehensive plan coordinating development efforts in agriculture, industry and infrastructure with special attention on transport, credit and irrigation. This again highlights the need for a special planning body.

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Economists like Amartya Sen have forcefully argued in favour of judging socio-economic performance of a country by the achievements in the field of extending capabilities and enhancing functioning[4]. Taking cue from this approach the United Nations Development Programmes (UNDP) has been publishing Human Development Report since 1990. According to this approach, human development is the end and economic growth is the means.

One important indicator of human development is or capability expansion is literacy. In this respect the performance of the Barak Valley is only marginally better than that of the Brahmaputra Valley India if total literacy rate is taken into account (Table 8). But in respect of female literacy Barak Valley lags behind Brahmaputra Valley. This means that in literacy development there is marked male-female inequality in the Barak Valley. Needless to mention, the Barak Valley with a literate population of 56.6 percent is far behind the States like Kerala which has achieved a literacy rate of 89.8 percent (Majumdar et al, 1998).

Another important indicator of human development is the progress in elementary education reflected in the number of primary schools. In Assam there are 154 primary schools per lakh of population exceeding for the all-India figures of 83. But the Barak Valley's relevant number is 149 suggesting that it lags behind the rest of Assam significantly. Peculiarly enough, large number of primary schools in Assam could not make any significant impact on the literacy rate vis-à-vis India. This casts doubt on the functioning efficiency of these elementary educational institutions in Assam.

Extension of health services constitutes another important aspect of human development. We do not have detailed information on this aspect pertaining to the Barak Valley. But Table 8 shows that the Barak Valley suffers from inadequacy of hospitals. Number of hospitals per lakh of population in the Barak Valley is only 3.21 against the relevant figure of 4.56 in the Brahmaputra Valley and 7.36 in India. A region which is so far behind in basic health services cannot be regarded as progressing in human development.

Employment is also regarded to be vital for human development. Figure relating to the number of the registered unemployed in the Barak Valley does not suggest that its position in respect of employment is more unsatisfactory than Assam as a whole. But it is observed that Barak Valley's number of unemployment per thousand of population (47), is marginally greater than that of India (43). Moreover, other indicators of development suggest that unemployment problem in the Barak Valley may be more acute than has been reflected in the official figures.

CONCLUSIONS

The sketchy socio-economic profile of the Barak Valley drawn in the foregoing sections goes to pinpoint the fact that the North Eastern Region is a heterogeneous socio-economic entity. The search for homogeneity cannot rationally be stopped even at the levels of States. Even within Assam, there are significant differences between the Brahmaputra Valley, the Barak Valley and the hill districts. Autonomous hill district authorities work in the hill region and there is still cry for greater autonomy. In spite of the special problems faced by the Barak Valley, no planning agency for this region has been created so far. The problem has been left to be dealt by Panhayati Raj Institutions, other local bodies like municipalities and District Rural Development Agencies etc. But there is a need to have an integrated development approach for the whole of the Barak Valley. This can be ensured only if a Development Council is established for this region. The Development Council should draw comprehensive plans for agricultural, industrial, infrastructural and human development of this region. It should have both popular representation and administrative wing consisting of experts in various fields. It must have command over the fund meant for the development of the three districts included within Barak Valley. The North Eastern Council and the State Government of Assam may delegate authority and devolve fund to this body under statutory provisions.

In this paper we have not discussed socio-cultural and ethnic peculiarities of the Barak Valley as we have taken care to avoid emotional issues of regionalism. In our view, regional economics and regionalism are poles apart. We have taken note of the dictates of regional economics which call for providing for heterogeneities within a nation or a component State while stressing the need for integrated and unified approach to development. The State of Assam as a whole will flourish more vigorously if regional

planning and its implementation are attempted separately for its different parts taking note of their distinctions in respect of socio-economic features.

We have only pinpointed the need for establishing a development council for the Barak Valley to solve its peculiar problems. The details of its construction, functions, finance etc have to be evolved through widest debate and discussions at various levels. We only want to stress the fact that the peculiarities of the problems of the Barak Valley can neither be grasped adequately by the State-level political-administrative authorities nor solutions can be found out without local-level initiative. The development council will combine the virtues of macro and micro-level planning. On the other hand it will coordinate the development activities of three districts and their constituents and on the other, it will be nearer to the grass root levels as it will concentrate on local problems.

A development council established for the Barak Valley can also work towards inter-state cooperation. Being located in the junction of Assam, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura and being not far from Meghalaya, the Barak Valley has a special role to play. Any meaningful planned effort especially in transport, irrigation and flood control, forest development and ecology protection, banking and trade in the Barak Valley will have regional external effects spilling over the State border and benefit other States. Similarly, development in the areas of the States bordering the Barak Valley will benefit the latter. Thus, one may envisage a much wider economic role of the Barak Valley Development Council in the development of North East India.

We started by referring to the principles of equity and efficiency in regional policy. We conclude by saying that establishment of a development council for the Barak Valley will meet the ends of both the principles.

APPENDIX: TABLES

Preliminary Note:

The tables in this appendix have been prepared by the authors on the basis of numerical information contained in:

a. Majumdar et al (1998);
b. Government of Assam (1994); and
c. North Eastern Council (1995).

Table 1

Population in Barak Valley vis-à-vis Some Other States in N.E. Region in (Census 1991)

	Population (in lakh)
Barak Valley	24.9
Mizoram	6.9
Arunachal Pradesh	8.7
Nagaland	12.1
Meghalaya	17.8
Manipur	18.4
Tripura	27.6

Table 2

Population Trends in Barak Valley
(Population in lakh)

Year	Barak Valley	Brahmaputra Valley	Assam	India
1941	8.95	56.67	66.95	3186.61
1951	11.16	67.47	80.29	3610.88
1961	13.78	91.79	108.37	4392.35
1971	17.13	124.56	146.25	5481.60
1991	24.91	191.09	224.14	8463.03

Table 3

Population Growth Rates in Barak Valley

Year	Barak Valley	Brahmaputra Valley	Assam	India
1941-51	2.23	1.75	1.83	1.26
1951-61	2.13	3.13	3.04	1.98
1961-71	2.20	3.10	3.04	2.24
1971-91	1.88	2.16	2.16	2.19

N.B: Growth rate for the decade 1971-81 could not be estimated due to non-availability of data for 1981 for Assam (Census was not held).

Table 4

Density of Population in Barak Valley

(Population in per sq. km area)

Year	Barak Valley	Brahmaputra Valley	Assam	India
1941	129	101	85	97
1951	161	120	102	117
1961	199	163	131	144
1971	248	222	186	178
1991	360	340	286	277

Table 5
Agricultural Development Indicators

Indicator No.*	Year	Barak Valley	Brahmaputra Valley	Assam	India
1	1981-82	30.89	41.60	34.46	20.46
2	1981-82	1.25	1.29	1.28	1.25
3	1981-82	8277	6445	6567	4305
4	1993-94	6.42	18.34	17.33	32.53
5	1993-94	47.96	42.91	42.02	39.15
6	1993-94	16.39	12.79	12.48	69.85
7	1989-90	14.47	-	11.31	17.45

* 1 - Percentage of net sown area to total geographical area.
2 - Ratio between gross cropped area and net sown area.
3 - Population per thousand hectares of cultivable land.
4 - Percentage of irrigated area to net sown area.
5 - Percentage of area under HYV to net sown area.
6 - Per hectare utilization of fertiliser (in kg).
7 - Average yield of rice (kg/ha).

**Data for different indicators could not be given for the same year due to non-availability of data.

Table 6
Industrial Development Indicators

Indicator No.*	Year	Barak Valley	Brahmaputra Valley	Assam	India
1	1991	7.1	12.7	11.9	13.3
2	1991	61	88	82	246
3	1991	1150	1836	1717	1794
4	1991	6.3	-	5.6	12.1
5	1991	23.0	-	20.4	20.5

* 1 - No. of factories per lakh of population.
2 - No. of small scale units per lakh of population.
3 - Average yield of tea (kg/ha).
4 - Percentage of secondary sector employment to total working population.
5 - Percentage of tertiary sector employment of total working population.

Table 7

Infrastructural Development Indicators

Indicator No.*	Year	Barak Valley	Brahmaputra Valley	Assam	India
1	1990-91	16.9	31.9	34.9	118.3
2	1990-91	6.1	10.8	10.0	30.5
3	1990-91	83.3	126.2	136.1	240.7
4	1990-91	30.3	42.9	38.9	62.0
5	1994	793	1226	1160	3350
6	1991	857.1	1075.5	1038.4	2594.1
7	1991	330.1	548.4	513.8	1580.3
8	1990	0.471	0.583	0.570	0.660

* 1 - Surfaced load length (in km) per lakh population.
2 - Surfaced load length (in km) per 100 sq. km area.
3 -Total road length (in km) per lakh of population
4 - Total road length (in km) per 100 sq. km area.
5 - No. of motor vehicles per lakh of population.
6 - Per capita bank deposits (in Rs.).
7 - Per capita bank advances (in Rs.).
8 - Credit-deposit ratio.

**Data for different indicators could not be given for the same year due to non-availability of data.

Table 8
Human Development Indicators

Indicator No.*	Year	Barak Valley	Brahmaputra Valley	Assam	India
1	1991	56.6	52.6	52.9	52.2
2	1991	46.1	48.9	48	39.3
3	1990-91	149	-	154	83
4	1993-94	3.21	4.56	4.52	7.36
5	1991	47	64	60	43

*1 - Percentage of literate persons.
2 - Percentage of female literate.
3 - No. of schools at elementary level per lakh of population (Barak Valley data excludes district Hailakandi).
4 - No. of hospitals per lakh of population.
5 - No. of registered unemployed per thousand of population.

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