



**BCIM Economic Corridor in West Bengal:  
A View from Districts Bordering Bangladesh and North Bengal**

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**First published in 2013**

by the Institute of Chinese Studies,

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Digitally printed at Sapna Photostat,

Munirka Phase-II, New Delhi

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BCIM Economic Corridor in West Bengal:  
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Abstract

*The proposed BCIM EC can be seen as an opportunity for India to develop the regions of Northeast as well as those areas located in North Bengal (NB). Existing literature on the subject shows that the proposed EC, the Indian component of which runs through select areas in the Northeast as well as southern parts of West Bengal, has a great potential to transform the 'sub-region' whose development has been hampered due to various reasons. Taking cue from this, the present study examines the border regions of West Bengal and the North Bengal region. The objective of such a study is to find out the nature of disadvantages and see if some of it could possibly be addressed by the proposed EC. For that the paper argues that the prospect of including the North Bengal region into the EC (preferably as an arterial corridor) is welcome as it can serve the twin objectives of firmly linking NB to Northeast as well as to address (and provide) the much needed impetus for the development of border districts.*

Keywords: BCIM Economic Corridor (EC), West Bengal, North Bengal, Northeast India, underdevelopment, borders

The Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Forum for Regional Cooperation is the new title given to the 'Kunming Initiative' since 2011. The Forum seeks to move beyond mere economic considerations and thus includes issues of 'multi-dimensional or multi-sectoral potential of the four-nation cooperation exercise'.<sup>1</sup> Conceived as regional, inter-regional as well as sub-regional venture the ideas of 'connectivity' and 'people-to-people contact' has emerged as the major plank on which cooperation among the countries is envisaged (Rana and Uberoi 2012). With the meeting between the Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2013 the idea of an 'economic corridor' received further impetus. In June 2014 the Vice President of India while on a visit to China reiterated that the 'BCIM (Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar) is a good and positive initiative we will be supportive of it.'<sup>2</sup>

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\* The views expressed here are those of the author and not necessarily of the Institute.

<sup>1</sup>As of December 2013 four Joint Study Groups (JSG) for each countries have been formed which are preparing a Report that would discuss and present the challenges and prospects for a variety of topics. These include 'multimodal connectivity; sub-regional energy cooperation; investment and financing; trade in goods and services, border trade, and trade facilitation measures; social and human development and poverty alleviation; people-to-people contacts, including tourism development; and the institutional arrangements required to activate the various components of the BCIM-EC.' See the Concept Note of the 'Stakeholders' Consultative Workshop on The BCIM (Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar) Economic Corridor' which was organized by MAKAIS Kolkata, the CII (Eastern) and ICS, New Delhi in May 2014. The note is available at [http://makaias.gov.in/Consultative\\_Workshop\\_may1-2/BCIM-ECWorkshop-ConceptNote.pdf](http://makaias.gov.in/Consultative_Workshop_may1-2/BCIM-ECWorkshop-ConceptNote.pdf) (accessed on 4th July 2014). Also see Rana and Uberoi (2012), Uberoi (2009) and Lama (2011) for a fruitful discussion.

<sup>2</sup> See *Economic Times*, 30 June 2014 available at URL [http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2014-06-30/news/50974672\\_1\\_maritime-silk-road-msr-bcim](http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2014-06-30/news/50974672_1_maritime-silk-road-msr-bcim) (accessed on 4th July 2014).

The proposed economic corridor is '1.65 million square kilometres that encompasses approximately 440 million'<sup>3</sup> people in China's Yunnan Province, Bangladesh, Myanmar and areas of East and Northeast India through the combination of road, rail, water and air linkages in the region. It is hoped that the EC 'will form a thriving economic belt that will promote common development of areas along the Corridor'.<sup>4</sup> Parts of the Northeast region and the state of West Bengal (especially the south district of North 24 Parganas) in India is sought to be firmly included into the cooperation and connectivity framework as the proposed EC will run through those areas. To deal with the Northeast, West Bengal and BCIM EC together would be beyond the scope of this paper, but what this paper proposes to do is to examine the prospects of the BCIM EC in West Bengal by looking the problems and prospects through the eyes of the border districts in West Bengal (WB) and the North Bengal (NB) region.

## BCIM-EC and West Bengal: Prospects for Development and Growth

WB is a border state that shares international boundaries with Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh.<sup>5</sup> The state is divided into 20 districts and shares internal state boundaries with Bihar, Jharkhand and Orissa in the west, and with Assam in the east. In the north WB is bordered by the state of Sikkim which shares international borders with China. The rank of WB among the top fifteen exporting states of India during 2010-11 was eighth but the exports are declining with the share of SDP in manufacturing following the same trend. There is also an 'infrastructure deficit' which is proving disadvantageous to the state despite of its favourable location in the east of India (Pal 2013:1).

In the context of BCIM-EC the potential of WB to play an important role has been duly noted by the Consul Generals of China, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Nepal.<sup>6</sup> They also however stressed on the need to improve existing infrastructure and connectivity in the state. Accordingly, the proposed EC in WB originates from Kolkata through the district of North 24 Parganas to Petrapole along the Bangladesh border. As such, it moves through the National Highway 34 and 35 which incidentally is also part of the Asian Highways (Number 1) road network.<sup>7</sup> From Petrapole it continues onwards through the N706 Highway of Bangladesh (see Figure 2 in Annexure). The BCIM Car Rally from Kolkata to Kunming in China was flagged off by the Chief Minister of WB in February 2013 who hoped that the rally 'successfully develops trade and investment in the BCIM region'.<sup>8</sup>

A paper published by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) in Bangladesh titled *BCIM Economic Cooperation: Prospects and Challenges* also notes that the 'BCIM region is one of the richest in the world in terms of natural and mineral and other resources'.<sup>9</sup> In this regard the paper accords

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.asiabriefing.com/news/2013/10/bangladesh-china-india-myanmar-economic-corridor-builds-steam/> (accessed on 4<sup>th</sup> July 2014).

<sup>4</sup> See 'Minutes of the First Meeting of the Joint Study Group of Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM EC)', available at <http://www.indianembassy.org.cn/newsDetails.aspx?NewsId=455> (accessed on 4<sup>th</sup> July 2014).

<sup>5</sup> The length of the Indo-Bangladesh border in West Bengal is 2216.7 km. Other state's share includes Assam (263 km), Meghalaya (443 km), Tripura (856 km) and Mizoram (318 km). See [http://mha.nic.in/hindi/sites/upload\\_files/mhahindi/files/pdf/BM\\_Fence\(E\).pdf](http://mha.nic.in/hindi/sites/upload_files/mhahindi/files/pdf/BM_Fence(E).pdf) for more details (accessed on 19<sup>th</sup> June 2014).

<sup>6</sup> See Arshad Ali, (2014). 'Diplomats detail problem areas in BCIM trade ties', *Indian Express*, January 11, 2014. URL: <http://indianexpress.com/article/cities/kolkata/diplomats-detail-problem-areas-in-bcim-trade-ties/> (accessed on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2014).

<sup>7</sup> According to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific (UNESCAP) the Asian Highway network initiated in 1959 is a network of 141,000 kilometres of standardized roadways crisscrossing 32 Asian countries with linkages to Europe. The 'Agreement on the Asian Highway Network' came into force in 2005. See URL: <http://www.unescap.org/resources/asian-highway-route-map> for more details (accessed on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2014).

<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.bcimcarrally.com/hmabout.html> for more details (accessed on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2014).

<sup>9</sup> See Mustafizur Rehman *et. al* (2007). 'BCIM Economic Cooperation: Prospects and Challenges', Paper 64,

importance to the coal reserves in the states of WB and Assam for meeting the energy requirements of the region. The state capital of Kolkata also serves as the key city for the supply of goods to the entire North Bengal (henceforth NB) region, Sikkim as well as to the Northeastern region of India. As such, the state is very crucial as far as the Indian component of the BCIM-EC is concerned. However, the state has been south-centric in its development with major industrial, connectivity and urban belts being concentrated therein. This does not mean that the south has developed uniformly as there are many disadvantaged districts in the south too. The point here is to indicate that comparatively the NB region as well as the border districts have not received the attention in policy matters even when there is much potential to be harnessed for the purposes of economic development. Perhaps a re-imagination through an arterial extension of the BCIM-EC may prove to be a catalyst in this regard.

## Border Districts and the NB Region: Physiography of Major and Minor Regions

As of May 2014 there are 9 districts in WB that share international borders with Bangladesh. Out of these, 6 districts fall into the region of NB. The border districts include (from north to south) Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Koch Behar (also known as Cooch Behar), Uttar (North) Dinajpur, Dakshin (South) Dinajpur, Maldah, Murshidabad, Nadia and North 24 Parganas. Accordingly, the 6 districts of the NB region include Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Koch Behar, Uttar (North) Dinajpur, Dakshin (South) Dinajpur and Maldah. The district of Maldah roughly serves as the north-south divide for the state of WB (See Figure 1 in Annexure). The physiography of WB can be divided into two major regions consisting of the Himalayan Region and the Gangetic Plains. The Himalayan Region can be subdivided further into two parts which includes the Darjeeling Himalayas (Darjeeling district except the Siliguri Sub-Division) and the Sub-Himalayan zone (plains districts of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar). Therefore, both the Himalayan and the Sub-Himalayan Region falls entirely in NB region.

The other major region which is the Gangetic Plain contains the Lower Ganga Plain in West Bengal which forms a part of the larger Indo-Gangetic Plains and 14 districts fall within this physiographic region. This region is further divided into four-micro physiographic zones. These are the Barind tract (Cooch Behar, Malda, North and South Dinajpur districts), the Moribund Delta (Murshidabad and Nadia districts), Proper Delta (districts of Burdwan, Kolkata, Hooghly, Howrah, South and North 24-Parganas) and finally the Rarh plain (areas of Purba and Paschim Medinipur districts, Bankura, Birbhum and Purulia). The North Bengal region is more diverse as it includes the portions of both the Himalayan regions (Darjeeling Himalayas and sub-Himalayan zone) and the Gangetic Plains, particularly the Barind tract. There is also a great physical diversity which is complemented by an equally diverse demographic composition within the border districts especially in the NB region.

## West Bengal: Some Crucial Indicators

The state of WB is the most densely populated state in India. The 2011 Census figures show the all-India density to be 382 (per sq. km) while for WB the density figure is 1029 and this is so even when fertility rates are declining. 72 percent of the population reside in rural areas whereas 28 percent reside in urban areas of the state. The less densely populated districts of WB are also worse served by infrastructural facilities than the others. Immigration is high from Indian states as well as from the countries of Nepal and Bangladesh. It may be seen that geographically the Eastern Region<sup>10</sup> has

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Centre for Policy Dialogue, Dhaka available at URL: [http://www.cpd.org.bd/pub\\_attach/op64.pdf](http://www.cpd.org.bd/pub_attach/op64.pdf). (accessed on 19<sup>th</sup> June 2014).

<sup>10</sup> The geographic Eastern Region includes, among others, the states of West Bengal and Sikkim. The geographic North Eastern region includes the seven states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Tripura, Nagaland and Manipur. The North Eastern Council (NEC) on the other hand includes the

the highest density of 625 persons (per sq. km) and the Northeastern region has the lowest density of 176 persons (per sq. km). WB lies in the east of India and its state capital is Kolkata. WB is also the fourth most populous state in India and its population has been increasing especially over the past decade.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the density of population in the state has been higher than the national average and is growing.<sup>12</sup> In ten years (2001-11) the population density grew by a figure of 125 persons per sq. km.

The literacy rate for the state has also been improving from 68.64 percent in 2001 to 76.26 percent in 2011. For 2011, the male literacy stands at 81.96 percent while female rate is at 66.57 percent. The upward change in the total rates stands at 7.62 percent and interestingly the improvement in female rates has been higher than that of the male literacy rates.

The state is also predominantly rural (68.13 percent) with urban population living in pockets or industrial belts that are more or less concentrated in the south.<sup>13</sup> This is simultaneously observed in the nature of land use in the state. The *Economic Review* (2007-08) published by the Government of WB indicates that about 60 percent of the total land use is for agriculture while non-agricultural sectors accounts for 20 percent.

#### Nature of Diversities in the Border Districts and NB

As per the 2001 Census, the total population of the districts under NB was 14.72 million, which was 18.35 percent of the state population. The NB region is also comparatively rural than the south and three districts of NB which are Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri and Dakshin Dinajpur are characterized by incidence of higher proportion of Scheduled Caste (SC) population. Similarly, the Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling districts (both in NB) have a high percentage of Scheduled Tribe (ST) population which accounts for 21.0 per cent and 13.8 per cent respectively. This is much higher when compared to the WB state average of 5.6 per cent. According to the 2011 Census data there are 46 groups that are recognized as ST and 60 recognized as SC. There is a separate recognition of Other Backward Classes (OBC) consisting of 143 groups which contain various Muslim communities as well.<sup>14</sup> Demands for inclusion of certain hill communities into the ST list have also been growing.<sup>15</sup>

#### Environment and Tourism in the Border Districts and NB

The three districts of NB (Darjeeling, Alipurduar and Jalpaiguri) fall within the Eastern Himalaya Region (EHR) which has been declared as 'hot spots of biodiversity'. EHR includes Bhutan, the Northeastern Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, North Bengal region and Sikkim, the far

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state of Sikkim.

<sup>11</sup> As per details from Census 2011, WB has population of 9.13 Crores, an increase from figure of 8.02 Crore in 2001 census. The total population growth in this decade was 13.84 percent while in previous decade it was 17.84 percent. The population of West Bengal forms 7.54 percent of India in 2011. In 2001, the figure was 7.79 percent. See <http://www.census2011.co.in/census/state/west+bengal.html> (accessed on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2014).

<sup>12</sup> The total area of WB is 88,752 sq. km. and the density is 1028 per sq. km which is higher than national average of 382 per sq. km. In 2001, density of West Bengal was 903 per sq. km, while national average in 2001 was 324 per sq. km. See <http://www.census2011.co.in/census/state/west+bengal.html> (accessed on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, the urban population in the state accounts for only 31.87% of the total.

<sup>14</sup> The list can be seen at [http://www.anagrasarkalyan.gov.in/html/obc\\_list.html](http://www.anagrasarkalyan.gov.in/html/obc_list.html) (accessed on 23rd June 2014).

<sup>15</sup> As of 2014 there are 10 hill communities in the fray for ST status. They are Rai, Yakkha, Gurung, Bhujel, Newar, Jogi, Sunwar-Mukhia, Mangar, Khas and Thami.

north of Myanmar (Burma), Nepal and Tibet. The EHR also includes four of the Global 200 ecoregions which are 'critical landscapes of international biological importance'.<sup>16</sup>

In the border districts of Bengal there are 9 Wildlife Sanctuaries and 5 National Parks.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, there are 4 National Parks along with 10 Wildlife Sanctuaries that are located in the NB region. About 18 percent of the NB region is also classified as forest land and much of it is located in the three districts of Darjeeling, Alipurduar and Jalpaiguri. The maximum area under forest (44.68 percent) is found in Darjeeling district of NB.<sup>18</sup> Data available from the WB *State Forest Report* (SFR) for the years 2011-12 show that from the year 1917 till 2012 there has been no increase in the area of forests.<sup>19</sup> In terms of the total area (which includes Reserve Forests, Protected Forests, and Unclassed State Forests and 'others')<sup>20</sup> the Jalpaiguri district has the highest area of forests (1790 sq.km) among the border districts as well as in the NB region while Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur (both in NB) have the lowest cover (18 sq. km).

### Urbanization and Development along the Border Districts and NB

According to Census 2011 Kolkata, along with the city of Haora (Howrah), are the two largest cities in the state. Howrah and Kolkata come under the Kolkata Metropolitan Region and is classified as a 'Mega City'.<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, both the cities are located in southern region of WB. There are altogether nine districts in WB which share international borders with Bangladesh. They are Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Koch (Cooch) Behar, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur, Maldah, Murshidabad, Nadia and North 24 Parganas. Out of the nine, six districts fall in the NB region. Accordingly, the NB region includes the districts of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Koch (Cooch) Behar, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur and Maldah (see Figure ...). It might be noted that the district of Jalpaiguri has been bifurcated to create a new district of Alipurduar in June 2014 taking the total number of districts in WB to 20.<sup>22</sup> Since this is a recent decision, separate district-level data is not available for the new district therefore combined data will be given in the form of the erstwhile united Jalpaiguri district.

The proposed BCIM-EC in WB runs entirely through the district of North 24 Parganas. Specifically, it begins from the 'mega city' of Kolkata through the district of North 24 Parganas where it reaches the Petrapole border into Bangladesh. The district consists of about 230 km of international borders

<sup>16</sup> See the WWF report titled 'The Eastern Himalayas: Where Worlds Collide', available at [http://assets.worldwildlife.org/publications/331/files/original/The\\_Eastern\\_Himalayas\\_Where\\_Worlds\\_Collide.pdf?1345732823](http://assets.worldwildlife.org/publications/331/files/original/The_Eastern_Himalayas_Where_Worlds_Collide.pdf?1345732823) (accessed on 25<sup>th</sup> June 2014).

<sup>17</sup> The 5 National Parks are Buxa Tiger Reserve, Sundarban National Park, Neora valley National Park, Singalila National Park and Gorumara National Park. The 9 Wildlife Sanctuaries are Bibhutibhushan, Singhalila, Buxa, Jalapara, Murti Wildlife, Senchel, Bethudahari, Chapramari, Gorumara, Jorepokhri, Mahananda and Parnadhan.

<sup>18</sup> See West Bengal State Forest Report (2011-12) available at [http://www.westbengalforest.gov.in/publication\\_pdf/sfr11-12.pdf](http://www.westbengalforest.gov.in/publication_pdf/sfr11-12.pdf) (accessed on 26<sup>th</sup> June 2014).

<sup>19</sup> The figures up to 1964 have been collated from the West Bengal Forests, *Centenary Commemoration Volume*, 1964 (cited in WBSFR 2012:12).

<sup>20</sup> According to the Indian Forest Act (1927) Reserved Forest is an area notified under the provisions of Indian Forest Act, 1927 having full degree of protection, thus all activities are prohibited unless specifically permitted (Sec.20). Protected Forest is an area notified under the provisions of the Indian Forest Act having limited degree of protection thus all activities are permitted unless prohibited (Sec. 29). Unclassed Forest is an area recorded as forest but not included in Reserved or Protected forest category therefore, the ownership status of such forests varies from state to state.

<sup>21</sup> There are three 'mega cities' in India according to the Census 2011. These are Greater Mumbai urban agglomeration (UA) with a population of 18.4 million, Delhi UA with 16.3 million and Kolkata UA with 14.1 million. See <http://www.census2011.co.in/census/metropolitan/184-kolkata.html> (accessed on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2014).

<sup>22</sup> See *The Times of India*, 25 June 2014 available at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/Alipurduar-a-new-district-on-June-25/articleshow/36916065.cms> (accessed on 25<sup>th</sup> June 2014).

with Bangladesh. It is also the tenth-largest district of the state in terms of area. The district of North 24 Parganas has the second highest district-wise population in India after Thane in Maharashtra<sup>23</sup> and its population is growing at a rate of 12.04 percent. The district has been undergoing rapid urbanization and figures show that the number of urban centres increased to fifty five from twenty three (1951-2001)<sup>24</sup> but the nature of this urbanization has however, not been uniform. Accordingly, considerable urban growth has been observed in the areas of Rajarhat, Barasat, Habra and Bidhan Nagar Sub-division. This is in sync with the all-India figures which also indicate absolute increase in urban population than in the rural areas.<sup>25</sup> The Barrackpore industrial belt<sup>26</sup> in WB is one of the most industrialized regions in the state but this pattern of urbanization has however been concentrated mostly along the central-western border of the district (NRSC 2014) which means that along the Bangladesh border there has been little or no urbanization.<sup>27</sup> The only minor urban centres along the WB side of the Bangladesh border are the towns of Barisat and Bongaon. Similarly, the Asansol-Durgapur belt which is seen as an emerging 'mini-Kolkata'<sup>28</sup> is also located entirely in the south of WB. The Asansol Durgapur Planning Area is a part of the Burdwan district and is neither a border district nor does it fall within the region of NB.<sup>29</sup>

This pattern is also true of all of the districts that border Bangladesh in WB. In the Nadia and Uttar Dinajpur district there is no urban centre along the border. In the Murshidabad district small urban and industrial areas include the Paharpur and Bansgara. Maldah district, which is also the technical start of the NB region, has only one urban centre near the border which is Mahadipur area. Similar pattern holds true for the district of Dakshin Dinajpur for which the closest urban centre along the Bangladesh border is Balurghat. For Cooch Behar the closest urban centre is Haldibari. However, contrasting pictures emerge when we examine the urban patterns in the Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts which fall in NB.

Siliguri and its adjoining areas which fall within the Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts have witnessed very high rates of urbanization in recent years. It has also emerged as the major city that caters to the NB region including the region of the Northeast.<sup>30</sup> It is connected to the rest of India by a railway junction (New Jalpaiguri) and an airport that is located at Bagdogra. A plan report by the Siliguri Jalpaiguri Development Authority concludes that Siliguri has the 'promise and potentiality to grow as a counter-magnet to state capital in NB area'.<sup>31</sup> This adds to the oft repeated adage that development in WB is Kolkata-centric which has consequently benefited only some of the southern districts in the state.

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<sup>23</sup> According to the 2011 census the population of North 24 Parganas was 10,009,781 while the figures for Thane were 11,060,148.

<sup>24</sup> See Paul and Chatterjee (2012).

<sup>25</sup> Level of urbanization increased from 27.81% in 2001 Census to 31.16% in 2011 Census. See [http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/paper2/data\\_files/india/Rural\\_Urban\\_2011.pdf](http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/paper2/data_files/india/Rural_Urban_2011.pdf) (accessed on 10th June 2014).

<sup>26</sup> Barrackpore is a sub-division in the district of North 24 Parganas.

<sup>27</sup> NRSC (2014), Land Use / Land Cover database on 1:50,000 scale, Natural Resources Census Project, LUCMD, LRUMG, RSAA, National Remote Sensing Centre, ISRO, Hyderabad. See the map which is available at URL: <http://bhuvan.nrsc.gov.in/gis/thematic/index.php?theme=nuis#> (accessed on 11<sup>th</sup> June 2014).

<sup>28</sup> See *Economic Times*, 30 August 2009 available at [http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2009-08-30/news/28407835\\_1\\_asansol-durgapur-development-authority-bengal-shristi-asansol-durgapur](http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2009-08-30/news/28407835_1_asansol-durgapur-development-authority-bengal-shristi-asansol-durgapur) (accessed on 4th July 2014).

<sup>29</sup> The Asansol Durgapur Development Authority (ADDA), a statutory Body of the Government of West Bengal is tasked with the planning and development of the area. For more details on the industries and plan see their website at [http://www.addaonline.in/about\\_adda.html](http://www.addaonline.in/about_adda.html) (accessed on 4th July 2014).

<sup>30</sup> The Northeastern region includes the eight states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura, Nagaland, Manipur and Sikkim.

<sup>31</sup> See 'Outline Development Plan Siliguri' of the SJDA, available at [http://www.sjda.org/pdf/odp\\_siliguri.pdf](http://www.sjda.org/pdf/odp_siliguri.pdf) (accessed on 11th June 2014).



The land use pattern for the border districts shows the predominance of agriculture. Some districts like Dakshin Dinajpur, Murshidabad, Cooch Behar and Nadia have more than 70 percent agricultural land. The only exception here is the Darjeeling district (43.7 percent) which is because of its tea plantations. Even North 24 Parganas which lies in the south and is relatively urbanized compared to both the border districts and NB has 67.3 percent of agricultural land. Despite such predominance, the agriculture sector has not been able to perform well. The *West Bengal Development Report* (WBDR 2010:26) notes that the rates of land-poor households was much higher where agriculture was the major means of livelihood. Although poverty ratio (both urban and rural) declined following the all-India trend there is still a high incidence of poverty.<sup>32</sup> An important point that the report makes is with regard to the lack of institutional credit that reinforces poverty and debt in the rural areas which means that around 50 percent of the farming households were reported to be indebted.<sup>33</sup>

### Under-development in NB: Some Issues and Indications

NB has remained as a 'No-Industry Zone except Tea and tourism'<sup>34</sup> where the production rates of tea also declined considerably.<sup>35</sup> The daily wages paid to the tea plantation workers are also abysmally low (rupees eighty to ninety five) and efforts to increase the wage by workers groups, unions and associations have met with hurdles.<sup>36</sup> The wages of tea plantation workers are subject to agreements among the workers, management and the government and as such do not come within the purview of the provisions of Minimum Wages Act. A contrast in this case is with regard to the Cinchona Plantations in the Mungpoo area of Darjeeling for which workers (unskilled) are to receive Rupees 206.00 as daily wage as of January 2014.<sup>37</sup> There have also been growing reports of malnutrition and starvation deaths in tea gardens and gardens that have been closed, though the

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<sup>32</sup> The Report notes that indices of poverty and inequality for both urban and rural areas declined in West Bengal from 22.14% in 1993-94 to 15.4% in 2004-05. Similarly, the all-India figures also dropped from 32.36% to 25.9% during the same period. However, despite such falling of poverty rates the Report notes that the proportion of rural household that did not have basic latrine facilities was still roughly 'three-fourths' up to 2001 (WBDR 2010:26-28).

<sup>33</sup> See the NSS 59th Round, Situation Assessment Survey of Farmers—Indebtedness of Farmer Households, Report No. 498(59/33/1) cited in WBDR (2010:52).

<sup>34</sup> The statement was made by Gautam Deb who is the Vice Chairman of UBUP and Minister-in-Charge of the NBDD in an interview. See [https://aitmc.org/in\\_conver4.php](https://aitmc.org/in_conver4.php) (accessed on 12th June 2014).

<sup>35</sup> According to data available from the Tea Board of India, for WB, the overall production of tea declined by a percentage of 4.9. In the tea growing districts of Darjeeling, areas of Terai and Dooars the production declined by 7.3%, 6.9% and 3.7% during 2009. See [http://www.wbidc.com/images/pdf/annual\\_report/annual\\_report-09-10/Tea-Industry.pdf](http://www.wbidc.com/images/pdf/annual_report/annual_report-09-10/Tea-Industry.pdf) for more details (accessed on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2014).

<sup>36</sup> The United Tea Workers Front (UTWF) which is a conglomeration that was formed in December 2013 in Siliguri has demanded that wage be increased to Rs. 321 based on the 15<sup>th</sup> Indian Labour Conference norms and Supreme Court orders (Unichoy vs. State of Kerala, 1961 and Reptakos Brett vs. Workmen Case, 1991) concerning 'family unit'. The UTWF consists of Terai Dooars Progressive Plantation Workers Union, Darjeeling Terai Dooars Plantation Labour Union, Progressive Tea Workers Union, West Bengal Tea Labour Union, Paschim Banga Khetmajoor Samity and the New Trade Union Initiative. See the Press Release of the UTWF available at <http://sanhati.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Press-Release-27-12-2013.jpg>. Additionally, see the report available at *The Telegraph*, January 9, 2014 at URL: [http://www.telegraphindia.com/1140109/jsp/siliguri/story\\_17767172.jsp#.U5q\\_uXKSyZ4](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1140109/jsp/siliguri/story_17767172.jsp#.U5q_uXKSyZ4). (both documents accessed on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2014).

<sup>37</sup> See West Bengal Labour Directorate website that compiles the minimum wages for various kinds of labour at [http://wb.gov.in/portal/WBLabour/LabourDir/WBLCMSPortletLabourWindow.jsessionid=484B3E1218681F22750B432D8D2159DA.node1?alf\\_f\\_name=synopsis\\_of\\_min\\_rates.html&dtname=LabourDir&action=e&windowstate=normal&alf\\_path=WebContent%2FDirectorates%2FLabourDir%2FOthers&mode=view](http://wb.gov.in/portal/WBLabour/LabourDir/WBLCMSPortletLabourWindow.jsessionid=484B3E1218681F22750B432D8D2159DA.node1?alf_f_name=synopsis_of_min_rates.html&dtname=LabourDir&action=e&windowstate=normal&alf_path=WebContent%2FDirectorates%2FLabourDir%2FOthers&mode=view) (accessed on 19<sup>th</sup> June 2014).

state government has consistently maintained that the deaths were not due to starvation.<sup>38</sup>As of January 2004 there were 22 closed tea gardens in the NB region.<sup>39</sup>

Data available from the Human Poverty Index (HPI) also show a lopsided pattern in indices for north and south WB.<sup>40</sup>In line with the earlier inegalitarian patterns of urbanization and industrialisation the district of North 24 Parganas has the highest rank (HPI 29.3) among the nine border districts. This also holds true when compared with the six districts of North Bengal. The average HPI for the nine border district (excluding North 24 Parganas) is 41.1 while for NB it is 41.78. This shows clearly that the border districts and NB are relatively more deprived in terms of knowledge and public provisioning. Uttar Dinajpur which is a border district as well as a NB district has a HPI of 51.2 which shows a very high degree of deprivation. Further, the average HPI for the entire NB region is 39.7. Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts in NB with HPI of 35.8 and 36.3 respectively are the only two exceptions here.

Similar is the indication from the Human Development Index (HDI) for the various districts.<sup>41</sup> According to the *West Bengal Human Development Report* (WBHDR 2004) there are very wide gaps in the HDI range for districts. For instance, the relatively better districts (or areas) of North 24 Parganas (HDI 0.66), Howrah (HDI 0.68) and Kolkata (HDI 0.78) all lie in the south. Also, the gap between Kolkata and Maldah in NB is staggering where Kolkata ranks first with 0.78 while Maldah has a low HDI of only 0.44. The five districts of NB save Darjeeling (HDI 0.650) are also worse off when compared to the three areas (mentioned above) in the south. In the case of the nine border districts, North 24 Parganas tops the list indicating that with reference to the parameters of health, income and education the region of NB and the other border districts are severely disadvantaged.

### Institutions in North Bengal: Problems and Prospects

Given such a view, the Left Front government in WB had established the *Uttar Banga Unnayan Parshad* (UBUP) or North Bengal Development Board in 1999 to address the 'issue of regional imbalance and backwardness and for comprehensive and integrated development of the six districts of NB'.<sup>42</sup>The UBUP was tasked with 'regional level coordination and monitoring of planning and development in NB'. Further, the board was to 'render macro-level advice' to district authorities with a thrust on social sectors like health and education.<sup>43</sup>However, it did not succeed in providing the impetus which would help develop the NB region.<sup>44</sup>A probe initiated by the present WB

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<sup>38</sup> NBDD in-charge Minister Gautam Deb said, "Starvation like situation does not exist at the Dheklapara tea garden (*Jalpaiguri's Madarihat block*) as the workers, who live in the area, get rice and pulses from the state government. They are also beneficiaries of MNREGS," See the report in *The India Express*, January 14, 2012 available at URL: <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/left-union-claims-starvation-deaths-in-tea-gardens/899666/> (accessed on 19<sup>th</sup> June 2014). Also see, 'Bengal Govt. denies starvation deaths in tea gardens', *The Hindu*, January 18, 2012 available at URL: <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-newdelhi/bengal-govt-denies-starvation-deaths-in-tea-gardens/article2809667.ece>. (accessed on 19<sup>th</sup> June 2014).

<sup>39</sup> See the *Report On Hunger In Tea Plantations In North Bengal* (2004) published by the Right to Food Campaign available at [www.righottofoodindia.org/data/teagardenreport.doc](http://www.righottofoodindia.org/data/teagardenreport.doc) (accessed on 19th June 2014).

<sup>40</sup>HPI for each district in West Bengal is constructed by taking the weighted average of the indices of knowledge deprivation and that of public provisioning by the WBDR (2010). Calculation has been done with data compiled from Census of India (2001) and District Level Household Survey (DLHS) of 2002-2004.

<sup>41</sup> The HDI is a composite index of three indices which include the parameters of health, income and education.

<sup>42</sup> See *Uttar Banga Unnayan Parshad*, Department of Planning, Government of West Bengal at <http://www.wbplan.gov.in/htm/MajorProgram/UUP/Guidelines.htm> (accessed on 12th June 2014).

<sup>43</sup> See the document titled 'Guidelines for Conduct of Business of Uttar Banga Unnayan Parshad', available at URL: <http://www.wbplan.gov.in/htm/MajorProgram/UUP/UUP%20Guidelines.pdf> (accessed on 12<sup>th</sup> June 2014).

<sup>44</sup>NB remained underdeveloped from the point of view of many sectors. For instance, the growth rates of

government under Trinamool Congress concluded that the UBUP met only fourteen times in the last eleven years and it could not give the utilisation certificate for Rupees 48 crores (out of the total three hundred and seventy crores) which was allocated to it.<sup>45</sup> In 2011, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee brought the UBUP under the purview of the North Bengal Development Department (NBDD) and reconstituted the board.<sup>46</sup> The NBDD was constituted in 2011 with the purpose of fast-tracking development in the NB region. Accordingly a sum of Rupees 200 crore had been allocated for the NB region in the 2012-13 financial years. The NBDD has embarked on a plan that seeks to improve infrastructure and tourism facilities in the NB region. In addition, the NBDD has also focused on the promotion of cultural activities of the local population.<sup>47</sup>

## North Bengal and Northeast: Towards a Possible Linking for BCIM-EC

The region of NB, as mentioned earlier, comprises of the northern districts of the state of West Bengal (WB) and includes the six districts of Cooch Behar, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur and Maldah. Figure ... which is drawn from the Census 2011 (in annexure) shows the geographical location of these districts. From the map we can also observe that the region stands at the cusp of internal state borders as well as international borders of Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. Internally, the region is contiguous to the Indian states of Bihar and Jharkhand in the East and Assam on the West. To its north lies the state of Sikkim which shares international borders with the People's Republic of China (henceforth China). The state of Sikkim is also connected to the rest of the Northeast region through NB, particularly the areas of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Siliguri. In this respect the regions of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar have been our focus of study. Special reference will be made to the city of Siliguri which is often referred to as the 'Gateway to the Northeast'.<sup>48</sup>

In this regard the Chief Minister of WB also argued in the Lok Sabha that NB region connects to the Northeast which in turn shares boundaries with other countries.<sup>49</sup> The region of NB is important because it forms a bridge between the rest of India and the Northeast region. Further, the region is also comparatively backward when compared to the rest of WB. This was also clearly brought out by the *Report on Comparative Backwardness of North Bengal Region* (2002) which was sponsored by the Planning Commission, Government of India.

What the Chief Minister consistently maintained in her speech was the need for *special but separate* development packages for the regions of NB and Northeast. This delinking in the imagination of the two regions is also officially sanctioned. For instance, the demand to extend the North East

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production, yield and area for the major food crops in WB over different periods between 1981 and 2006 indicate that the districts in North Bengal did not perform well (WBSDR 2010:45).

<sup>45</sup> See <http://wbnorthbengaldev.gov.in/HtmlPage/news.aspx?id=5> (accessed on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2014). Also see *Business Standard*, September 13, 2011 available at [http://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/wb-govt-orders-probe-into-fund-allocation-for-north-bengal-111091300059\\_1.html](http://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/wb-govt-orders-probe-into-fund-allocation-for-north-bengal-111091300059_1.html) (accessed on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2014).

<sup>46</sup> With the Notification no.76-F/PS(NBD)/11 dt. 23-09-2011 the board was reconstituted. Accordingly, there are ten members with the Chief Minister as Chairperson and the Minister-in-Charge as Vice Chairperson. The rest of the members are sitting/retired members of Parliament or the state legislature. See <http://wbnorthbengaldev.gov.in/HtmlPage/uup.aspx> (accessed on 12<sup>th</sup> June 2014).

<sup>47</sup> A flagship project of the NBDD is the *Uttarbanga Utsav* (North Bengal Festival) in the six districts of NB which had a special focus on Siliguri Sub-Division and Jalpaiguri for the year 2012.

<sup>48</sup> The Northeast region of India presently consists of eight states which include Assam, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura, Sikkim and Manipur. The North Eastern Council is the nodal agency for the economic and social development of the Northeastern Region. The North Eastern Council was constituted in 1971 by an Act of Parliament. See <http://necouncil.nic.in/> for more details (accessed on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2014).

<sup>49</sup> See Mamata Banerjee's speech in the Lok Sabha available at <http://164.100.47.132/LssNew/psearch/result14.aspx?dbsl=5946> (accessed on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2014).

Industrial Policy<sup>50</sup> to the region of NB has been rejected. Similarly, the demand for extending the membership of North Eastern Council (NEC) to NB has also been rejected (Das (2010:347). This enlargement (and restriction) of imagination which is mentioned above is seen not only in the official or governmental imagination but also in the aspiration of the adjoining regions. In the recent years, two authors have written in favour of reconceptualising select regions of NB in its relation to the Northeast region of India.

Both Das (2011, 2010) and Lama (2013) seem to understand NB as being a crucial part of the Northeast. While for Das NB can be conceived of as an '*extended* Northeast', for Lama the Darjeeling region in NB will 'complete the definition and geographical configuration of the Northeast'. Lama, it must be noted, is making this plea in favour of a separate state comprising of the Darjeeling hill and Dooars-Terai region in NB while Das's approach hinges primarily on the questions of migration and the Look East Policy. The Terai and Dooars are the floodplains and foothills located in the eastern Himalayas. Specifically they constitute the plains of Darjeeling District, whole of Jalpaiguri District and upper region of Cooch Behar District therefore lying entirely in NB. Both the authors recognize the 'strategic' constructions of the NB region vis-à-vis the security of India as well as its location as a major economic gateway to neighboring countries like Nepal, Bhutan, China, Bangladesh, Myanmar and beyond. While Das focuses on the underdevelopment, migration, homelessness and conflicts of the imaginations of multiple 'homelands' in the Siliguri plains of Darjeeling district, Lama focuses on the potential of the region to stand on its own feet, as it were, if it was to be separated from West Bengal.

Taking cue from the above mentioned two authors I believe that perhaps a more clear indication of the acceptance of NB as an extension of the Northeast was the floating of a proposal to include the hill areas of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council into the Sixth Schedule. This notion was put forward by the party Gorkha National Liberation Front in 2005. While this proposal could not be implemented due to various reasons, what is crucial is the fact that the provisions of the Sixth Schedule were designed specifically for the protection and development of tribal communities of the Northeast taking into consideration their historicity, customs and traditional institutions. Thus, the willingness of the then Government of India to consider expanding the ambit of the Sixth Schedule to include certain areas in NB is significant in as much as it is a *de facto* acceptance of the contiguity between NB and Northeast India. This study stands in solidarity with the potential placing of NB as a part of the Northeast given the various contiguities while at the same time it also seeks to exercise caution by examining the important (un-reconciled) issues of territoriality, autonomy and citizenship both in the Northeast as well as NB.

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<sup>50</sup> The Government of India has introduced a comprehensive new industrial policy for the Northeastern Region. This includes infrastructure support, project and production related benefits for all industrial activities including those of small scale, agro and rural industries. See <http://www.pib.nic.in/newsite/erelease.aspx?relid=26480> for more details (accessed on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2014).

ANNEXURES  
 Figure 1: Districts of West Bengal

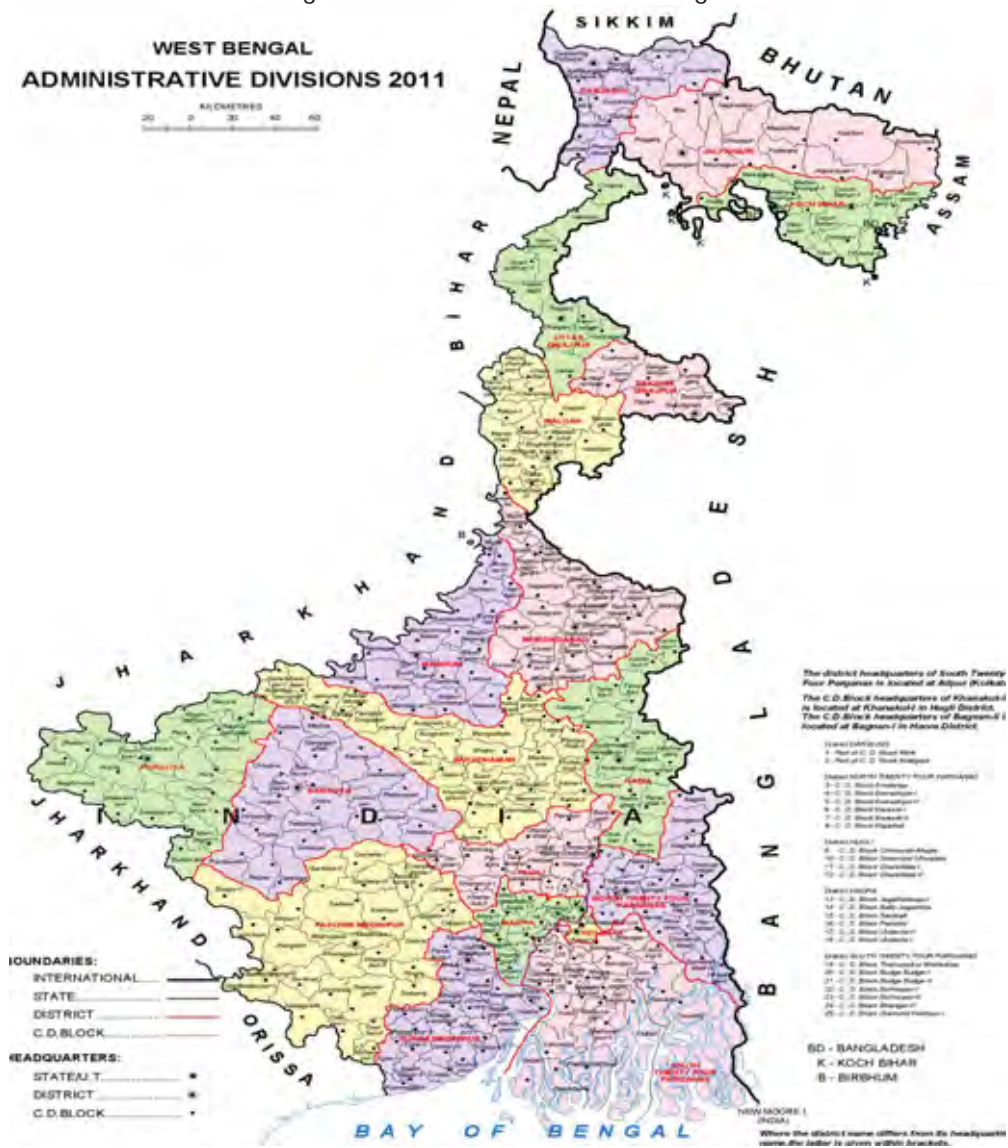


Figure 2: The Route of the BCIM 2012 Car Rally Survey



Source: Rana and Uberoi 2012:143

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