

On the Eastern Frontiers: Barak Valley as an Economic Zone

K C Chakravarti

PARTITION has brought into existence an area which is practically cut off from the mainland of India. In the absence of any one name for this area, we may call it the Barak Valley. As this valley is surrounded by Burma on one side, Pakistan on the other and the hills and jungles of Naga land on the third, it has created new complications for India's defence and strategy. Added to this is the disruption of its economy, due to the Partition, and the very dismal future which its 25 lakhs of inhabitants have to face.

The Barak Valley includes the three districts of the Slate of Assam, viz, (1) Cachar, (2) North Cachar and (3) Mizo Hills District; and two Union territories (4) Manipur and (5) Tripura. It is not a compact geographical, ethnic or cultural area. The people, a heterogeneous mixture without any linguistic or cultural unity, are welded together today by common economic suffering. It will be seen from the accompanying map (p 590) that the Barak Valley has Burma on its south and the east, East Pakistan on the west and the hills and jungles of Upper Assam on the north. A road from Imphal to Dimapur through the hills and jungles of Naga land connects Manipur with Assam and through Assam, it connects the Barak Valley with the rest of India. Tripura and Mizo Hills district are linked with Silchar by road and Silchar is connected with Upper Assam by a single metre gauge railway line which runs through hills and jungles.

ISOLATED FROM INDIA

These districts have no all-weather transport system interconnecting one another so that, very often, they remain separated from one another and the whole region, again, in certain seasons, remains isolated from the main land of India. Agartala, Silchar and Imphal have aerodromes and air transport, not very reliable during the rainy season, is the only means of communication. A railway journey from Silchar to Calcutta, a distance of about 900 miles, takes some sixty hours by a long and circuitous route, provided there is no breach or dislocation *en route*, and

in the hill section in the rainy season, dislocation is a normal feature.

Before Partition, Calcutta could be reached from Silchar by rail and steamer in twenty-four hours. Water transport from Calcutta was fairly speedy and cheap. This part of the Barak Valley could dispose of its produce in East Bengal at remunerative prices. Transport cost being low, the produce could also be sold in the Calcutta market. Similarly it could draw its supplies from East Bengal and via East Bengal, from Calcutta at reasonable prices. Partition, however, has completely altered the situation.

NO INDUSTRY, HIGH UNEMPLOYMENT

This Zone is large in area but being hilly and full of jungles, there is not much cultivable land in it. The population, again, is not large as shown in the table below, but the density in the settled areas is high.

AREA AND POPULATION OF BARAK VALLEY

	Area Sq Miles	Population (000)
Assam Districts :		
Cachar	2,680	1,116
Mizo Hills	8,145	196
North Cachar	1,888	40
Union Territories:		
Manipur	8,628	578
Tripura	4,032	639
Total:	25,373	2,569

If we leave out the hills and jungles, the density of population will be more than 600 per square mile. Tea is the only industry of the region and 95 per cent of the people are agriculturists. After 1951, some 8 lakh refugees from East Bengal have migrated to this area. Many of the refugees were skilled artisans. This should normally have strengthened the economy of this region but in the absence of industries, large, medium or small, they had to be absorbed in agriculture. This has actually worsened the situation.

Another source of loss, waste, and worry to the people are Hoods. Practically every year, crops are

damaged in some area or oilier by Hood. As yet no flood control scheme is in operation.

There are some four hundred tea gardens, but these are mostly in moribund condition. There is, strangely enough, no light engineering industry and the tea gardens depend on Calcutta for all of their engineering requirements.

HIGH PRICES OF NECESSITIES

The people in this zone suffer from two severe handicaps both arising from the difficulty of transport and this is an offshoot of Partition. Most of the consumption goods like salt, sugar, dal, matches, kerosene, paper, books, medicines, clothes, etc, which are needed for every day use, come from Calcutta and the transport cost being high, these are sold at a high price. Prices of most articles are so high that the cost of living in this zone is perhaps the highest in India.

On the other hand, again due to high transport cost, the commodities which are grown in this zone, cannot be exported and have to be disposed of in the local market with the result that their prices are very low. Oranges sell here for quarter of an anna! Ginger, pineapples, *pan*, bamboos, cane, vegetables that are locally grown, sell at such low prices that the producers who grow them do not get a fair income.

The difficulty would have been solved if the transport system could be improved but nothing short of a revolution in the transport system will be needed for such change. The problem would have also been solved if our relations with Pakistan had improved but no such improvement is within sight. The third and the last alternative is to develop this zone as an independent and separate economic unit.

ASSAM GOVERNMENT APATHY

For developing this region, the Slate Government of Assam will be of little help. The region is only nominally connected with Assam. (Geographically, linguistically, culturally and economically, the Barak Valley has practically no bond with Assam, although three of its districts

form part of the State. The State Government would rather set up industrial units in the Assam Valley or develop economically the Assam Valley district. Instead of setting up a paper mill at Karimganj or a light engineering workshop at Silchar, the State Government would have them either at Gauhati or Tezpur or Jorhat. Politically, there is no denying the fact that the districts of Barak Valley are always neglected by Assam.

No capitalist from outside is likely to invest his money in this region. Why should a Marwari or Gujarati invest a couple of lakhs in an area which is an isolated pocket surrounded by unfriendly Pakistan and the Naga hostiles? Left to itself, therefore, there is no chance of any development in this zone.

CENTRE MUST TAKE INITIATIVE:

The Union Government, however, can take the initiative and it is a good sign that the Union Government is giving its attention to the problems of this region. An expert

team of five members headed by Dr J D Verma had visited this area and is likely to submit its report soon. Another team will be coming shortly. Any scheme for the development of this zone must be on the following lines.

As raw materials and skilled labour are available in plenty, there are chances of setting up certain industries. Raw materials for sugar, cotton, paper, cement and coal or petroleum based industries are available but if these are to be developed on a large scale and this is necessary to make production economically feasible the products have to be marketed outside, and here transport cost will be a problem. Subsidy for a long period, therefore, will be necessary.

Secondly, the problem of power has to be solved first before industrial development can be thought of. Electricity generated is practical!) negligible, and is sold at a prohibitive rate. For industrial use, it is charged at four annas per unit.

There are coal deposits in the Barail hills but they can not be worked until transport costs become economic. Goal can be brought to Silchar from Raniganj across the rivers of East Bengal but coal in the interior of Cachar, at a distance of some 25 miles, cannot be transported to Silchar at economic rates. This means that the interior of this undeveloped and backward zone has to be opened up by an all-weather transport system.

Thirdly, there should be a light engineering industry without which no industrialisation can take place. Even for ordinary repairs, one has to depend on Calcutta. The largest engineering concern in the whole zone employs only 9 men!

Finally, the case for setting up those industries whose products can be sold within the zone is strong, and priority should be given to them. High transport cost acts as a natural tariff wall. Protected by this barrier, certain industries producing strictly for the local market can be easily developed.

