

PM's Address at the Plenary Session of the North-Eastern Council

I am very happy to be here for the North Eastern Council Plenary meeting. I also take this opportunity of welcoming you all to this meeting. I hope that the deliberations that have already taken place since yesterday and further deliberations that we have today, will help in faster development of this region.

I am also happy to note that the North Eastern Council has provided support in the development of the North East region. It has been instrumental in establishment of a number of institutions and taking up infrastructure projects in the region.

The North Eastern Council was set up in 1972. Since then it has contributed to the development of the North East region. To meet the growing aspirations of the people, it is important that the North Eastern Council introspects and assesses the extent to which it has been able to achieve its objectives. Perhaps, there is a need to re-orient and upgrade the North Eastern Council. You may like to consider developing the North Eastern Council as a state-of-the-art resource centre for the North Eastern states with the necessary resources, knowledge and skills. The resource centre may enable the states and the implementing agencies to properly plan and execute projects, promote research and innovations and provide strategic policy vision for the region.

The North Eastern Council may look into developing a specialised domain expertise either by itself or through an agency model to assist states and central ministries in their development planning as also problem solving needs. This will enable the imbibing of good governance and best practices in the region. The North Eastern Council should also consider focussing on issues in emerging areas of livelihood, entrepreneurship, venture funds, start-ups and skill development. All this will help in generating jobs.

The government has been focussing on the development of the North East region through its pro-active “Act East Policy”. As part of this policy, we are focussing on reducing the isolation of the region by improving all round connectivity through road, rail, telecom, power and waterways sectors.

If the western region of the country can develop, if other regions of the country can develop, I see no reason why the North East region of the country cannot develop. I am also convinced that India can move forward if all the regions develop including the North East region. The North East region is also very important to us for strategic reasons. And it is my conviction that we have to bring this region at par with the other developed regions of the country.

In the current Budget, more than Rs.30,000 crores have been earmarked for the North East region. It should be our endeavour to ensure that this money is spent well for the development of the region.

We believe in cooperative and competitive federalism. States that are strong and want to grow further, need to be given adequate authority and resources. And States that are not so strong, need to be given needful assistance. It is in this regard that based on the report of the Committee of Chief Ministers, we have decided to continue to provide assistance in the ratio of 90:10 for core Central schemes and 80:20 for non-core schemes to the North Eastern States.

In the recent past, we have established two important projects in Assam - Brahmaputra Cracker and Polymer Limited and Numaligarh Refinery Limited's wax unit. These are big projects that would create huge employment opportunities in the North East region. However, it has taken us many years to complete these projects. We have to ensure that we are able to complete our projects in time and without cost over-runs. Only then can we realise the true benefits of these projects.

The North East is the gateway to South East Asia and we need to take advantage of this. We are opening up both road and rail routes to our neighbouring countries. This should give a boost to the economic development of the region.

We have created a specialised highways construction agency for the North East - the "National Highways and Infrastructure Development Corporation" - that was incorporated on 18th July 2014. Since then it has set up its Branch Offices, one each in every North Eastern State. As of today, it is implementing 34 projects in the North Eastern States covering a length of 1001 kilometres at a total cost of over Rs. 10,000 crore.

In the road sector, we need to keep in view the special land and weather conditions of this area. Most of the North East areas get a lot of rainfall and are also prone to natural calamities and land-slides. We thus need to be careful in using appropriate technologies in the construction of roads in this area.

We have recently implemented an improved internet connectivity project for the North East region in collaboration with Bangladesh. This will make available 10 GB of seamless alternate bandwidth for the region. This integration will benefit the North East region tremendously.

The Government is also making a heavy investment in power transmission projects covering all the eight North Eastern states at a cost of around Rs 10,000 crore. This would ensure power to more areas. The recent commissioning of Bishwanath-Chariyali-Agra transmission line has also brought 500 MegaWatt additional capacity to the region.

The railways have undertaken a major expansion in the region at a cost of around Rs 10,000 crore. In November 2014, Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya were put up on the rail map. Agartala in Tripura has also been connected with broad gauge line. We are on the way to ensure that all the North East states come on the rail map soon.

In the North East, the Indian Railways has commissioned about 900 kilometres of Broad Gauge in the last two years, leaving only about 50 kilometres Meter Gauge lines to be converted in 2016-17. In addition, a 132

kilometre part of third alternative connectivity route to North East (that is New Maynaguri – Jogighopa) has also been commissioned.

There are a number of strengths of the North East which we need to harness for healthy growth of the region. All the states of the North East region are blessed with natural scenic beauty, distinct historical cultural and ethnic heritage. All this offers tremendous scope for tourism in the region. There is also a great scope for mountaineering, trekking and adventure tourism in the region. If developed and promoted well, this can emerge as the biggest employer in the region. It can also add to the growth and income of the region.

I understand that the Ministry of Tourism has identified a thematic circuit for the North East region. I hope that the North Eastern states will make the best use of the scheme to develop tourist circuits and attract tourists from all over the world. The region can also look into combining a few popular destinations of the neighbouring countries with their tourism circuits. This will be an added attraction for tourists.

The majority of youth of the North East region is English speaking. With improved connectivity and language skills, you may look into setting up of the BPO industry in the region.

The Government has approved North East BPO promotion scheme in the Digital India programme for creation of employment opportunities. The North East States must avail facilities and get these BPOs operationalized in their respective States. This will promote growth and provide jobs to our youth.

The North East is home to exotic fruits, flowers, vegetables, aromatic plants, and herbs. Most of them are organic in origin. If we focus our development strategy on organic farming, it would help the region greatly.

A few months ago, I was in Sikkim and participated in a function to declare Sikkim as the first organic state in the country. Other States can take a lead from Sikkim and the North East Council can also play an important role in the development of organic farming in the region. The North East can become the organic food basket for this country. Organic products are going to be increasingly used widely and if the North East Council can assist the states in the region to take a lead in this area, it will contribute immensely to the income of the people and the region.

There is a large rural population in the North East region. If we talk of Assam alone, 86% of the population lives in rural areas. We have initiated the Shyama Prasad Mukherjee Mission to bring in economic, social and basic development of the rural areas in a cluster model. It should be the endeavour of the region's states to make use of this mission for the development of the rural areas.

In the end, I would like to express my gratitude to the chairman and all the members of the North Eastern Council for successfully conducting the plenary meeting in Shillong.

My special thanks to the Governor and the Chief Minister of Meghalaya for hosting this meeting. I am sure that the deliberations in this meeting will go a long way in providing direction to the development of the region. Thank you.

AKT/NT