

Original Research Article

Regional Development Gap Between North Bengal and South Bengal: An Analytical Discussion

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Abstract: *Introduction:* North Bengal (NB) occupies a strategically important and spatially unique location within the broader of West Bengal province (WB) and forms part of an important sub-region of Eastern India, which, in northern WB, is made up of the eight districts. The physiography of North Bengal is characterized by significant diversity. It dominates throughout the hill and foothill region's tea plantations, horticulture and tourism. *Objectives:* The study has tried to determine the geographic location and condition, the regional development gap between South Bengal (SB) and North Bengal (NB) and also to evaluate what affect the geography, the connection between these two regions, and how much bias in historical government decisions has played a role in generating different development levels in these two different areas. *Research Methodology:* The Research Design has implemented a qualitative-quantitative Mixed Method Approach, drawing upon secondary statistical analysis supported by the conceptual/theoretical application of regionally devised development processes. *Results and Discussion:* The interconnectedness of natural conditions and human actions/decisions has resulted in many of the outcomes in the region, including environmental sensitivity and vulnerability to disasters and resource dependence. The disparities in poverty, literacy and infrastructure between North Bengal and South Bengal are due to numerous causes and are highly interconnected. *Conclusions:* There are equal amounts of importance placed on investing in education, skill development, and healthcare as they are all essential elements of human capital in achieving long-term regional development.

Keywords: Tea Plantations, Horticulture, Tourism, Development Gap, Poverty, Literacy, Infrastructure.

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INTRODUCTION

North Bengal (NB) occupies a strategically important and spatially unique location within the broader of West Bengal province (WB) and forms part of an important sub-region of Eastern India, which, in northern WB, is made up of the eight districts of Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, Cooch Behar, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur and Malda as well as having the largest share of WB's border with the countries of Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh. The only land corridor (Chicken's Neck) connecting Southern WB and mainland India to the Northeastern area of the country is located in Siliguri and forms the sole corridor link to Northeast India. North Bengal has tremendous geopolitical and strategic value because of this unique geographic positioning (bordering) with Nepal, and Bangladesh. The physiography of North Bengal is

characterized by significant diversity; for instance, it has the two eastern Himalayan Hill Ranges of Darjeeling and Kalimpong, Terai-Dooars foothills region and highly fertile alluvial plains that provide drainage for some of the major rivers flowing through India (Teesta, Torsa, Jaldhaka, Mahananda). This diverse physical environment has shaped the human settlement, type and intensity of land use and associated economic activities throughout this region (Singh 2018). It dominates throughout the hill and foothill region's tea plantations, horticulture and tourism. In the vast plains where the majority of North Bengal's population lives, intensive agriculture occurs, primarily paddy, jute and maize are cultivated. North Bengal also forms a part of the Eastern Himalayan biodiversity hotspot region, giving North Bengal significant ecological value as it moves toward development (Das and Sarkar 2019).

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The socio-cultural landscape of North Bengal today is a product of: 1) Historical migration; 2) Colonialism; and 3) Cross-border trade activities. As a result, the region's population is made up of Bengali, Gorkhas of the north-east, Adivasi, Rajbanshis, and other indigenous hill tribes (Basu, 2015). Consequently, the political landscape has been formed by complicated interactions among individuals seeking to assert their identity, achieve autonomy, and develop the hill districts of North Bengal. Although North Bengal has many natural resources and a strategic location, the region is still facing many developmental issues, such as poor infrastructure, flooding, high levels of unemployment, and unequal access to basic social services (Planning Commission of India, 2014). The region is therefore seen as having a unique combination of geographic advantage, cultural diversity and persistent development challenges, creating a situation where it requires a focused academic analysis.

OBJECTIVES: The objectives of the study include the following:

1. To determine the geographic location and condition of North Bengal; and
2. To identify and discuss the regional development gap between South Bengal (SB) and North Bengal (NB) as far as developing strategies;
3. To evaluate what affect the geography, the connection between these two regions, and how much bias in historical government decisions has played a role in generating different development levels in these two different areas.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Types:

The Research Design will implement a qualitative-quantitative Mixed Method Approach, drawing upon Secondary Statistical Analysis supported by the Conceptual/Theoretical Application of Regionally Devised Development Processes.

Data Collection Method:

All data for this research will use Secondary Sources and will come from valid, credible and authoritative sources including: Census Reports (India) 2011, Multi-Dimensional Poverty Index Reports (NITI Aayog), Planning & Development Documents from the Government of West Bengal, Peer Reviewed Academic Journals, Books/Publications on Regional Development and from Established Online Databases/Statistical Portal.

Indicators of Data Analysis:

The study will assess the existence of regional imbalances in certain economic dimensions using several socio-economic indicators namely: Level(s) of Education/Literacy, General Poverty & Multi-Dimensional Deprivation Index, Infrastructure (i.e., Road Density/ Connectivity), Employment/Industrial Organisation, Migration/Urbanisation Trends.

Regional Comparison Framework:

The North/South Regional Comparison Framework will identify systematic differences in seasonal development; therefore, it will determine where/when district development occurred within North and South Bengal. Analytical Methods and Techniques: As this is a macro-regional study the authors will utilise descriptive statistics, inter-district comparisons, tables and interpretative reasoning as the primary means of analysis rather than econometric models.

Theoretical Context:

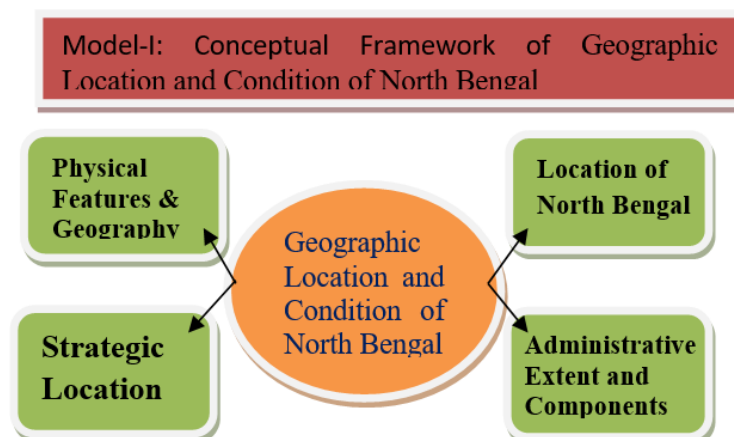
The authors will be guided by Recently Developed Theories concerning Regional Economic and Social Development and Inequality; the guiding theories are: Myrdal's Theory/Circular and Cumulative Causation Theory, Hirschman's Concept of Unbalanced Growth Theory, Core and Periphery, and Spatial Polarisation Theories.

Interpretative Approach:

To explain why inequities, endure in spite of policy interventions, quantitative results are interpreted within a larger historical, geographical, and institutional context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION AND CONDITION OF NORTH BENGAL



Interpretations of Model-I:

Model-I provides a framework for understanding North Bengal that links the various physical, strategic and administrative aspects of the area to show how they affect the geography, general state, and characteristics of North Bengal. Most importantly, the way the distinct physical features of North Bengal (such as the foothills of the Himalayas, the riverine plains of the Ganges, the forests of the eastern Himalayas) determine how people settle and where they can obtain their resources; the major factors that determine North Bengal's geographic and geopolitical significance (the fact that North Bengal is in effect the "north-east corridor" between mainland India and the other eight north-eastern states and neighbouring countries); and the way that the various administrative units within the district of North Bengal combine to constitute the diverse socio-economic and cultural characteristics of North Bengal. In addition to using the specific examples outlined in the model to explain the results of placing North Bengal within a broader geographic context, Model-I provides a method of determining how location affects trade and cross-border relationships, how geographic factors provide both opportunities for and constraints on development, and how to determine whether or not North Bengal has similar geographic conditions to other regions in India. Overall, Model-I effectively integrates geography, location and administration to create a complete understanding of North Bengal's regional character and North Bengal's development. Now we discuss these in detail below.

1. The Location of North Bengal:

North Bengal is located in the northern part of Indian state of West Bengal, situated with its southern portion, within Eastern India, being located north of the Ganges River and extending to the foothills of the Eastern Himalayas. Geographically, North Bengal is comprised of several districts lying approximately between 25°53' and 27°13' North latitude and between 88°15' and 89°53' East longitude. The northern border of

North Bengal is the Himalaya and the southern border is formed by the Ganges River and the land is located in the state of West Bengal. The northern portion of North Bengal shares its international borders with Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh, the eastern border is with Assam and the western border is with Bihar. In terms of land area, North Bengal is the narrow Siliguri Corridor (also known as the Chicken's Neck), connecting the rest of India to its northeast states, making it of strategic importance (Ghosh, 2016; North Bengal Development Department Report, 2025, Districts of West Bengal Division (District) list, 2025, Geographical Background of North Bengal, 2016).

2. Administrative Extent and Components:

North Bengal is comprised of the districts of Alipurduar, Cooch Behar, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Dakshin Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, Malda, and Uttar Dinajpur and functions under the North Bengal Department as established under the West Bengal Government and their administrative departments are responsible for the development of these regions throughout North Bengal Region. The hills of Darjeeling and Kalimpong are under the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration, which is semi-autonomous body that provides local governance, and development of the area (North Bengal division, 2025; Wikipedia contributors).

3. Physical Features & Geography:

North Bengal's geography encompasses a broad expanse from the Darjeeling Himalayas to the subdivision of the Terai and Dooars, extending into the flatlands of northern Bengal. The Himalayas modify the region's climatic conditions, resulting in a cooler climate found in the hills and a subtropical monsoon climate in the lower-lying area of the plains. There are many rivers that flow through this area including the Teesta, Mahananda, Jaldaka, and Torsha. The important national parks located here include Gorumara, Jaldapara, and Buxa, representing the ecological inheritance of this region. The Siliguri Corridor connects north Bengal strategically

through lowland passages to other parts of the country and now forms a very critical link between the Northeastern states of India with the rest of the country for rail, road, and air travel connections.

4. Strategic Location:

North Bengal is strategically located for travel, trade, and national security because it falls within the Siliguri Corridor, which connects the Indian mainland with the seven Northeastern states of India and two countries like Nepal and Bangladesh, and nearby Bhutan.

Natural hazards also play an important role in defining the area's strategic location. The breadth of the Siliguri Corridor is only most probable 22 kilometers. The region's links to mountain passes combined with recent heavy rainfall and landslides in places such as Mirik and other hilly areas; have affected transportation services and exposed severe local risk to infrastructure and people, exposing this area's susceptibility to monsoon-related hazards due to its physiographic and climatic patterns.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT GAP BETWEEN SOUTH BENGAL AND NORTH BENGAL



Model-II: Conceptual Framework of Regional Development Gap between South Bengal and North Bengal

Interpretation of Model-II:

The Comprehensive Conceptual Framework (Model II) provides an explanatory framework for understanding the geographical area and overall environment of the North Bengal region through a systematic approach connecting the physical features, strategic importance and administrative framework of the North Bengal Region. Specifically, it highlights how the diverse physical geography of the North Bengal Region, consisting of the Himalayan foothills (hills), alluvial plains (lowlands), river systems (rivers), and forest ecosystems (forests), has shaped the patterns of land use, settlement patterns and ecological sustainability in North Bengal. Model II also illustrates how North Bengal is strategically located at the intersection of the Indian mainland and the North-Eastern states, as well as international borders with Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh, thus providing it with geopolitical relevance and providing the opportunity to

influence trade routes, migration flows and security issues. The model illustrates how multiple districts form a single region that exhibits cultural diversity and uneven development, and describes the administrative extent and components of the model as a framework for improving the clarity of governance and complexity of regional planning. The model also provides a means of understanding how physical and locational factors work together to create infrastructure, enhance access and increase economic activity. The interconnectedness of natural conditions and human actions/decisions has resulted in many of the outcomes in the region, including environmental sensitivity and vulnerability to disasters and resource dependence. Model II provides a holistic spatial understanding of North Bengal by providing an integrated approach to the Region's geography and strategic location and the administrative structure that supports the development of the Region. Now we discuss these in detail below.

1. Persistence of Regional Disparities:

The gap between North Bengal (NB) and South Bengal (SB) is a result of historical processes and the way that the region has been shaped by spatial economics, the political economy, and the different priorities given to policy. Studies on regional inequality in West Bengal show that the development outcomes of West Bengal are polarised across geographic regions with southern districts performing better than northern districts on most social and economic indicators (Sengupta & Chakrabarti, 2024; Chattopadhyay, 2011). That the gap between North and South Bengal continues to persist despite the development of market-based economies suggests that there has not been sufficient spatial convergence due to market forces alone.

2. The Educational Gap in the Formation of Human Capital

2.1 Size of the Education and Literacy Gap: Literacy rates are increasing across West Bengal, but educational inequality across the regions is still significant. For example, southern districts, including Kolkata, North 24 Parganas, Hooghly, and Purba Medinipur, continue to have consistently higher literacy rates and schooling attainment than northern districts, like Malda and Uttar Dinajpur, that are educationally lagging compared to southern districts. Additionally, these gaps exist for the following reasons: School retention rates, Availability of access to secondary and/or higher education, Availability of teachers and institutions. Studies also demonstrate that the location of educational deprivation corresponds to conditions of poverty, rurality, and lack of infrastructure, all of which are more extreme in North Bengal (Basu & Roy, 2018).

2.2 Structural Causes:

The educational gap continues to be caused by three different structural factors: The higher number of colleges, universities and vocational/technical colleges located in the southern part of the state, urban investment in education is generally focused on the southern end of the state, and the inheritance of low education levels among agricultural and plantation workers, especially in the northern part of the state; through education, the process of cumulative causation functions to reproduce the regional economic disparities over time (Myrdal, 1957).

3. Poverty, Deprivation, and Living Standards

3.1 Spatial Concentration of Poverty:

The Multidimensional Poverty Index clearly demonstrates that poverty has a northward concentration pattern, particularly in the districts of Uttar Dinajpur, Malda, and Dakshin Dinajpur. Although the overall level of poverty is declining throughout the state, these declines have not occurred uniformly across the entire state, and therefore the district of South Bengal continues to benefit from diversified economies and urban employment opportunities at a pace faster than that of the other districts in the state (NITI Aayog, 2023).

3.2 The Causes of the Persistence of Poverty in North Bengal:

Poverty in the northern part of the state is: Structural rather than transitional, it has been associated with low levels of underemployment and poverty in the tea plantation industry as well as informal labour, and it is also reinforced through weak access to markets, seasonal vulnerability, and therefore continues to be a persistent source of poverty throughout the region; South Bengal has benefited from both the availability of non-farm employment and the existence of diversified industrial and service sector economies. The historical legacy of poverty in both areas has created two distinct economies, of the district of South Bengal, and the underlying policy issues (Chattopadhyay, 2011).

4. Economic and Industrial Development Gap

4.1 The Hooghly Industrial Belt in South Bengal has historically drawn capital, labour and infrastructure during colonial and post-colonial times, creating a cumulative growth pole in South Bengal, while North Bengal has remained peripheral (Pal, 2023). Presently, the economy of North Bengal continues to be based on: • Tea estates • Agriculture & allied sectors • Small-scale agro-processing The sectors above generate low value-added products along with limited backward-forward linkages, which inhibit the growth of regional Income.

4.2 Industrial Concentration in South Bengal is exhibit strong path dependency whereby investments made in the past still influence the present conditions. Investments in North Bengal have not created an industrial cluster so there is no incentive for private investment – creating a vicious cycle of underdevelopment (Hirschman, 1958).

5. Infrastructure & Connectivity Divide:

5.1 Geographical Factors South Bengal has benefited from a dense network of roads and railways connecting to Kolkata; however, North Bengal's physical infrastructure development is limited by: Geographical barriers – mountainous terrain in Darjeeling-Kalimpong; Flood prone areas in the Terai region & Dinajpur districts; High construction costs and maintenance requirements of such facilities. Studies indicate a lower density of roads and highways, access to sanitation, reliable electricity service and digital connectivity within multiple districts of North Bengal, when compared to South Bengal (Dutta *et al.*, 2022).

5.2 Infrastructure as a Development Multiplier:

The infrastructure divide in North Bengal is not only a barrier to market access, educational and health services, but also a barrier to industrial investment. Consequently, the lack of adequate infrastructure is, therefore, a binding constraint on North Bengal's economic and social development trajectory.

6. Migration and Urbanisation:

Due to South Bengal's increasing urbanisation rate, it has resulted in an enhanced ability to realise: Economic Agglomeration (i.e., the concentration of related businesses), Expansion of the service sector, Improving efficiency of public service delivery. In contrast, towns located in North Bengal do not possess the economic concentration necessary for them to qualify as regional growth centres, hence the predominance of Skilled Migration flows from North Bengal to South Bengal that perpetuate the demographic/economic imbalance between these two regions (Sengupta & Chakrabarti, 2024).

7. Governance, Policy-Bias, and Institutional Capacity:

Historically, Regional Development Policies in West Bengal have been skewed toward Urban-Industrialisation, and desired efficiency over equity.

Although there is a movement currently underway to address this disparity through policy and programmatic changes, a number of factors limit the outcomes of these policies, including: Weak local institutional capacities in North Bengal, Fragmented nature of Implementation, Lack of Decentralised Planning. The lack of parity among the regions does serve to compound the existing economic/social disparity.

8. Cumulative Interlinkages and Cumulative Causation:

To understand the gap between North and South Bengal, an analysis using the Circular/Cumulative Causation concept may be the solution, as: Low levels of education & talent translate to low incomes; Low levels of income deter Infrastructure Development; Lack of Infrastructure deters Investment; Low Amount of Investment will continue to keep a person in poverty. South Bengal enjoys the reverse of this virtuous Cycle.

Table-1: Variation of Literacy Rate in Percentage in the districts of North Bengal and South Bengal as per 2011 Census

District	Literacy Rate (%)	District	Literacy Rate (%)
North Bengal		South Bengal	
Darjeeling	79.92	Purba Medinipur	87.66
Cooch Behar	75.49	Kolkata	87.14
Dakshin Dinajpur	73.86	North 24 Parganas	84.95
Jalpaiguri	73.79	Howrah	83.85
Malda	62.71	Hooghly	82.55
Uttar Dinajpur	60.13	South 24 Parganas	78.57
		Paschim Medinipur	79.04

Source: Census, 2011

Interpretation: South Bengal Districts (including Kolkata, North 24 Parganas and Purba Medinipur) have much higher literacy rates (greater than 80%) than many of the Districts in North Bengal (some districts have

literacy rates of less than 75% including Malda and Uttar Dinajpur). This geographic disparity in educational attainment is evidence of a significant regional gap in educational attainment.

Table-2: Multidimensional Poverty Headcount Ratio in the districts of North Bengal and South Bengal as per 2011 Census

District	Poverty Headcount (2019–21)	Poverty Headcount (2022–23 Projected)
North Bengal (NB)		
Cooch Behar	10.31%	7.46%
Jalpaiguri	8.85%	6.40%
Darjeeling	5.45%	3.94%
Malda	15.57%	11.26%
Uttar Dinajpur	21.65%	15.66%
Dakshin Dinajpur	13.37%	9.67%
South Bengal (SB)		
Kolkata	2.56%	1.85%
North 24 Parganas	4.37%	3.16%
Howrah	6.06%	4.38%
South 24 Parganas	10.96%	7.93%
Bardhaman (Paschim)	11.20%	8.10%

Source: Census, 2011

Interpretation:

The ratio of multilevel poverty distribution illustrates an overall decrease in poverty through the geographic area of southern to northern India. For example, southern districts of West Bengal, especially in

southern Calcutta and North 24 Parganas, have fewer residents classified as impoverished compared to many of the northern districts of West Bengal (Uttar Dinajpur and Malda), although some of the mountainous (hilly)

districts located further north (Darjeeling) tend to do somewhat better than the former mentioned districts.

10. Missing of Basic Community Services/Infrastructure:

There are very few centralised sources that contain all the different district level indicators that look at community infrastructure. However, existing research on road density and connectivity has created proxy measurement tools for infrastructure.

Using Road Density & Connectivity as Proxies: In West Bengal, the research conducted has shown road density, which is one measure/tip gauge to indicate infrastructure access, across the districts to be comparatively greater in the southern districts and much lower than majority of the northern and many of the central districts., thus indicating an imbalance in infrastructure growth. Example, Cooch Behar and Uttar Dinajpur (both in the Northern part of West Bengal) had lower road density compared to the majority of the southern districts (e.g. Kolkata, Hugli).

Infrastructure and Learning in Schools- State Level:

National level reporting on school outcomes has demonstrated that there are differences across districts in West Bengal regarding education facility type and outcomes, which is indicative of the wide diversity of facility types and student performance outcomes. Even within districts that perform well North 24 Parganas, etc., with respect to facilities and facilities outcomes digital and safety scores are considerably lower than the learning performance scores in these same districts.

Why the Gaps Exist: Analysis

The disparities in poverty, literacy and infrastructure are due to numerous causes and are highly interconnected.

1. The preference for urban industrial development that has characterised central and state policies for many decades has resulted in a focus on urban areas of South Bengal, thus delaying investment in North Bengal rural and remote areas and contributing to the differences in social and economic conditions between these two regions. Recent investment policy developments have attempted to create a more equitable distribution of investments between South and North Bengal, but the legacy of the historical pattern of investment is difficult to overcome. South Bengal (including Kolkata), has historically received an extraordinary amount of investment in education, infrastructure and industrialisation, which has contributed to the high level of literacy and economic activity and continues to provide employment and capital to South Bengal.

2. The extreme geographic diversity of North Bengal (including the mountainous districts of Darjeeling and Kalimpong) and the border districts that were historically significant contribute to the relative isolation of the North Bengal region compared to South Bengal. The mountainous terrain of North Bengal and its

vulnerability to flooding (e.g., Terai/Dooars) present obstacles for businesses locating and developing in that region. Conversely, the flat nature of the South Bengal region allows for the creation of transport corridors (rail, road), industrial estates and freight service centres.

3. The economic structure of South Bengal has developed to provide diversified employment across industrial and service sectors, especially in the Kolkata Metro region, resulting in higher wage earnings than North Bengal, where the economic base continues to revolve around agriculture, which negatively impacts income and educational investments and poverty levels in North Bengal.

4. The vast majority of education and digital learning service locations and health service providers in South Bengal continue to be located in the more populated urban areas, which places South Bengal in a more advantageous position with respect to literacy and human development compared to North Bengal's more rural geographic regions.

5. Colonial and Historic Investment Patterns: Industrialization and governmental administration during colonial times and the early post-colonial era focused on Kolkata and the southern portion of Bengal, which led to long-term benefits in infrastructure, capital accumulation and development of institutional capacity being heavily located in South Bengal. North Bengal was seen as a less important area in the overall colonial and post-colonial strategic plans of the time.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

1. The limitations of this study can be attributed to its reliance on secondary data, which restricts micro-level analysis.
2. The availability and consistency of district-level data limit the level of analysis possible for interregional comparisons.
3. The methodological approach is predominantly descriptive and comparative in nature, as opposed to econometric analysis employing higher-order techniques.
4. The study's temporal limitation includes the fact that all indicators are sourced from decadal census data.
5. The study does not incorporate the application of a primary data collection methodology or the perspectives of stakeholders that are involved with the planning of development, however.

RECOMMENDATIONS & CONCLUSIONS

There are equal amounts of importance placed on investing in education, skill development, and healthcare as they are all essential elements of human capital in achieving long-term regional development. Increased accessibility to quality educational and health care services will not only contribute to an increase in the overall societal welfare but also increase productivity as well as labour force participation. Furthermore, because

the fragile hill and flood-prone plains of North Bengal have diverse ecological systems, it is essential to approach the development process with consideration for the environment. Therefore, the adoption of climate-resilient agricultural practices, sustainable tourism and green economic development will enable North Bengal to achieve economic growth without creating further harm to the environment. Additionally, effective governance and decentralised planning are critical to transitioning policy intentions into actual results. It is critical to develop local governmental agencies, improve capacity and capability within regional institutions, develop working relationships, create partnerships, and develop and strengthen community involvement to ensure that all development efforts are relative to the needs of the community and that they are inclusive in nature. A coordinated and evidence-based approach that incorporates an inclusive planning model will allow North Bengal the opportunity to become an active participant in the creation of further economic and social development throughout the state.

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