# Exploring English Communication Teachers' Perception of TBLT: A Case Study of B. Tech. Classroom Practice in Indian Engineering Colleges

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## Abstract

The paper attempts at finding out the level of understanding of the communication teachers teaching English language communication courses in B.Tech. colleges of the concepts of Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) method. The research work also tries to see whether their attitude towards implementing TBLT in classrooms is positive or negative. Since, this aspect has never been studied before, an empirical study was conducted on 66 such teachers at a few technical colleges in India. The study explored - Level of understanding of the teachers, and Teachers' attitude towards implementing TBLT in classrooms. It was found that the level of teachers' understanding of TBLT was quite high and the attitude towards implementing TBLT in classrooms was clearly positive. In India, communication skills teachers at technical colleges have good understanding of TBLT method and they are positive about implementing the same in the communication classrooms of engineering colleges.

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## Introduction

English Language is a very important language in the world today and it is equally important in the context of India too. It is in fact the co-official language of India and functions as the link language across the country. In India there are more than 30 regional language spoken in different parts. English is the only language which is understood at almost all the places. Apart from English being a link language, it is also the language of employment. Good English communication skills ensure good employment for the people. The students of professional and business institutions need good command over English language in order to get good jobs in reputed companies. Therefore, in almost all the professional and business institutions in India English Language communication skills are taught. In addition to English being necessary to get jobs, it is also important to even understand the higher education subjects. Most of the books on science, technology and fiction are written in English language and good understanding of English will give the students access to the huge library all across the world.

As such communication doesn't have anything to do with any particular language and it is just a means to convey messages. Communication can be done using any language, even body language, that is, non-verbal cues. But in the Indian context, when we talk about communication skills, it is essentially English language communication skills. The job of the communication skills teachers in the engineering colleges is to help the students develop and improve effective English language communication skills.

English, in the Indian context, is the language of higher education, media, upper judiciary and bureaucracy and corporate businesses. In fact, India has the second largest number of English speakers in the world after the United States. The language teachers in India have to use a method which is an amalgamation of various approaches devised so far. Some of the important approaches to teaching English as a second language in India are:

1. The Grammar-Translation Method
2. The Direct Method
3. The Audio-Lingual Method
4. Bilingual method
5. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

## The Grammar Translation Method (GTM)

The language teaching method which was used extensively during the 16th century was the Grammar-Translation Method which was originally devised to teach Latin and Greek. The approach rely heavily on learning basic grammar rules of the target language and promoted rote learning of the vocabulary. The learners were supposed to translate the text from the mother tongue to the target language using the rules of grammar of the new language. however, the method was used to teach those languages basically as part of the academic curriculum and thus, hardly any emphasis was laid on

improving the speaking skills of the learners. There was no provision of interaction and didn't help the learners acquire good speaking skills and perhaps, this was the reason of the failure of this method.

## The Direct Method

The Direct Method was propounded in the 20th century to teach second language. The method imitated the natural way of acquiring the new language and thus, is also called the Natural Method. The learners learning a new language through this method were not allowed to use their mother tongue. The emphasis is on teaching second language naturally through exposure and compulsion to communicate. The Direct Method of teaching or learning language establishes direct and immediate relation between experience and expression while the theoretical concepts are taught throughout he use of 'realia'.

According to H. E. Palmer, the following are the basic characteristics of the Direct Method:

1. No translation of any form to be allowed
2. Basic Grammar Rules to be taught inductively
3. More emphasis on speaking
4. Use of connected texts to be encouraged
5. Pronunciation should be taught on phonetic lines
6. Theoretical concepts to be taught using 'realia'

The major challenge to this method was the creation of natural environment especially at a place like India where exposure to English language is very limited.

## The Audio-Lingual Method

The Audio-Lingual Method was taken after the Behaviorist Theory according to which certain human personality traits can be trained through drilling. The Audio-Lingual method was also known as the Army Method or the New Key. It is basically an approach which was used to teach English language through the use of drills. In this approach to language teaching, grammar rules are taught implicitly, and more focus is on memorization of the structure.

The following are the salient features of Audio-Lingual Method, according to J.C. Richards et-al.:

1. Repetition
2. Inflection
3. Replacement
4. Restatement

In the Indian context, this method has not been very effective for the sheer monolingual nature of most of the Indian classrooms. In addition to this, memorization and drilling become tedious and boring unless the instructor adds some

excitement through innovation.

## Bilingual Method

The Bilingual Approach to Language teaching was proposed by Prof. C.J. Dodson who urged to make use of the first language of the learners to develop competency and fluency in the target language. The first language, in this method, is used to explain the concepts, rules of grammar and the meanings of idioms, phrases, words and phrases. The term 'bilingual' means two languages and in this approach to teaching English as a second or foreign language, $L_1$ is exploited in order to develop $L_2$.

## Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

The most recent approach to language teaching is Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method. Earlier, language was considered to be a cognitive skill which could be acquired through memorizing or drilling; then it started to be regarded as a socio-cognitive skill which could be acquired through social interaction; and in the present times, under the influence of the research and studies by Halliday and Chomsky, language is considered as a communicative skill and the most suited approach to language teaching these days is CLT. The CLT approach to language teaching emphasizes on making the learners able to communicate in the target language rather than making them rote learn the grammar rules of the target language. In this approach, the teacher is simply a facilitator whose job is to provide an environment to the learners which is conducive to learning. It uses "authentic texts" and gives learners space to interact with one another in the target language, with of course a common task to do.

In India also, Communicative Language Teaching is the method used by most of the language teachers. CLT makes extensive use of tasks to teach language and thus, Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) can be considered a branch of CLT. TBLT focuses on authentic use of language and makes the learners use the target language in meaningful tasks. TBLT was popularized in India by N. Prabhu who realized that the learners learnt the new language more effectively by indulging in tasks where they need to use the target language in an authentic way. According to Prabhu's Bangalore Project, the use of task-based instructions make language in the classroom communicative since it relates directly to real-life situations. The task-based teaching makes use of the natural ability of the learners to learn a language.

A task, according to Rod Ellis (2003), has four main characteristics:

1. The primary focus of a task is pragmatic meaning
2. There should be some kind of gap in the task. According to N. S. Prabhu's Bangalore project (cited in Harmer, 2001) there are three major types of gaps - information gap, reasoning gap, and opinion gap.
3. The participants choose the linguistic resources needed to complete the task.
4. The outcome of the task should be clear, defined and non-linguistic.

According to Ellis (2003), any attention attached to the form i.e., grammatical structures, at the time of teaching language, would distract the learners. Therefore, the teachers have to be careful while designing a 'task' and must keep in mind the fact that the outcome should be non-linguistic so that the learner in addition to acquiring language, also acquire information about various issues.

It is very clear that language learning is affected by a variety of variables like material, activities, feedback and evaluation and TBLT method has a very positive impact on all these variables. TBLT provides the learners with natural and meaningful tasks, real life situations and an evaluative feedback that gives greater opportunities of using language. In the Indian context, this feature is indeed very valuable since the environment provided in the Indian language learning classes gives limited accessibility to use the target language on a daily basis. TBLT provides relevant activities and tasks wherein the learners are encouraged to use the target language as much as possible. In addition to this, since the tasks prepared are authentic and relevant to the field of the learners, they feel interested too to participate.

The current study aims at exploring the perceptions and the expectations of the language teachers from Task Based Language Teaching method. The study has been conducted taking into consideration the technical colleges where the language learners are would-be engineers. The purpose of the study has been to know how effective TBLT method is in teaching language to professional students especially those who are pursuing Engineering degree. It has been observed that even despite the proven pedagogical benefits of TBLT Method and its ability to bring together the participants and engage them in interesting activities while using the target language, the approach hasn't been researched much. Unfortunately, however, a quick review of task-based literature shows that despite its pedagogical benefits surrounding the participatory learning culture, TBLT has not yet been sufficiently researched or proven empirically in terms of its classroom practice in school foreign language learning contexts (Carless, 2004; In-Jae Jeon, 2005). Taking this into consideration, the present study aims at exploring Indian EFL teachers' perceptions of task-based instruction based on investigating their understandings of TBLT concepts, and their expectations from the approach.

## Literature Review

Language teaching and learning has been an important part of all the human civilizations since time immemorial. "Language Teaching is notorious for methodological pendulum swings, amply documented in published histories of the field. Currently, task-based learning teaching are increasingly fashionable…" (Long, 2014). Task Based Language Teaching is currently the most used approach to teaching second or foreign language and perhaps, the most researched field. The method has become very significant in the field of second or foreign language teaching in terms of encouraging the development of process-based syllabus and designing communicative tasks to enhance learners' real use of the target language through the emergence of the communicative language teaching approach in the early 1980s (Jeon and Hahn, 2000). Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is an approach that differs from traditional approaches by emphasizing the importance of engaging learners' natural abilities for acquiring language incidentally through the performance of tasks that draw learners' attention to form (Ellis, Skehan, Li, Shintani and Lambert, 2020). Task based teaching and learning was promoted by N. S. Prabhu after his Bangalore Project in 1987 (Harmer, 2001). The Bangalore

Communicational Teaching Project (CTP) came into being as a reaction against 'structural' teaching and Dr Prabhu and his associates believed that "the need for a change in the syllabus was less pressing than the need for a change in methodology" (Beretta and Davis, 1985). According to Jeremy Harmer, tasks promote language acquisition through the types of language and interaction they require. Although the teacher may present language in the pre-task, the students are ultimately free to use what grammar constructs and vocabulary they want. This allows them to use all the language they know and are learning, rather than just the 'target language' of the lesson (Harmer, 2001). Tasks can also be designed to make certain target forms 'task-essential,' thus making it communicatively necessary for students to practice using them (Loschky and Bley-Vroman, 1993). According to Rod Ellis, there are four major characteristics of a task (Ellis, 2000):

1. It involves a primary focus on meaning.
2. It has some kind of 'gap'.
3. The participants select the linguistic resources required to complete the task.
4. A task has a clearly defined outcome.

The gap mentioned by Ellis, was further explained by Prabhu. He identified three major types of gap - information gap, reasoning gap and opinion gap. Information gap involves transfer of information from one person to another by encoding it into a language. Reasoning gap involves deriving new information through inference, reasoning and deduction. Opinion gap refers to gap created by personal preference, feeling or attitude. Task-based teaching learning is beneficial for the students as it involves meaningful activities which can be related directly to the outcome and the interests of the students. This approach is more student centric and provides for extra-linguistic skill building.

There have been a few studies in India which focus on the implementation and importance of using TBLT method to teach English language. The authentic material or text that is used in TBLT method of language teaching encourages the learners to participate. TBLT is a methodology which provides the learners with the material that engages them actively in order to achieve an outcome or to complete a task (Dorathy, 2018). In the Indian context, it has been observed that the practice of teaching language using lecture mode still persists, however, the emergence of TBLT method has made language teaching more effective (Devi, 2017). TBLT method can be used to improve the overall communication skills of the learners. Sudeepthi Dondapati used the TBLT framework to help students improve their writing skills. After making the students undergo the tasks, it was observed that the experimental group had improved their essay writing skills and were able to produce clear texts with better cohesion and logical structure (Dondapati, 2020). It has been observed that engaging students in relevant tasks and encouraging them to use the target language can help the learners learn the target language in a more effective way. The teaching of grammar rules has become obsolete. "The task-based approach is better than traditional method as it stresses on communication and it uses the language to accomplish a task like in real life situations rather than performing grammar exercises" (Jahanshahi and Tamandani, 2017).

## Research Design and Methodology

The present paper attempts at exploring the expectations of the teachers who teach professional/technical communication to the students at engineering colleges in National Capital Region (NCR[*]), India. In order to explore the expectations, the following domains were investigated:

1. Teachers' comprehension of Task Based Teaching basic concepts
2. Teachers' opinion about implementing Task Based Teaching approach in classrooms
3. Teachers' preference or otherwise of Task Based Teaching method

## The objectives of the present study are

1. To explore and investigate the understanding of the teachers of the second language teaching and learning method known as Task Based Teaching.
2. To investigate the expectations of the teachers from the Task Based Teaching method in terms of the implementation of the method in engineering classrooms.
3. To explore the preference of the teachers for the Task Based Language Teaching approach to language teaching.

## Research Questions

On the basis of the literature review and the objectives, the following research questions have been formed for the study:

Q1. What is the understanding level of the teachers of the concepts of TBLT?

Q2. Is the opinion of the teachers towards the implementation of TBLT method positive or negative or neutral?

## Profile of the Respondents

The respondents for this study were the teachers at Engineering Colleges who were teaching communication skills courses to the engineering students. In the Indian context, teaching communication skills is essentially related to teaching English language. In almost all the engineering colleges students are helped to develop and improve their command over English language. The questionnaire prepared for the study was administered to 66 teachers. The responses were recorded and then analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. 80% of the respondents were doctorates in English and a little more than 48% had more than 10 years' experience of teaching English language and communication skills courses to professional students. However, just 9% respondents were certified language teachers.

## The Instrument

The questionnaire adapted from Nunan's checklist for evaluating communicative tasks (2004) consisted 15 items. Items from 1-7 were deployed to check whether the teachers were aware of the basic concepts and principles of Task Based Teaching. Items from 8-15 were used to record the attitude of the teachers about implementing TBLT approach in the classes to teach English language communication skills to engineering students in particular.

The instrument was modified to suit the teachers teaching communication skills courses in the engineering colleges in the NCR, India. The questionnaire comprised 15 items and was based on 5-point Likert scale from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree.

**Table 1.** Expectations of the Teachers

| Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |

The questionnaire was administered to the teachers who teach English language/Communication Skills courses at various engineering colleges in the NCR, India. It was assumed that the teachers would have good understanding of the concepts of TBLT and they would have positive attitude towards implementing TBLT method in their classes to teach English language communication skills. To investigate, if these assumptions were true, the questionnaire based on Task-Based Language Teaching method was administered to 66 teachers at Engineering colleges in NCR.

## Data Analysis Procedure

The collected data was entered into the computer and then was quantitatively analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics including mean, frequency and standard deviation were carried out for all the items in the study. The paired samples T-Test was carried out to find the difference between the understanding and attitude of the respondents.

# Discussion and Results

## Understanding of the Concepts

**Table 2.**

| Item No. | Item | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | A task is a communicative goal directed. | 4.62 | 0.48 |
| 2 | A task involves a primary focus on meaning. | 4.60 | 0.52 |
| 3 | A task has a clearly defined outcome. | 4.76 | 0.53 |
| 4 | A task is any activity in which the target language is used by the learner. | 4.20 | 0.73 |
| 5 | TBLT is consistent with the principles of communicative language teaching. | 4.60 | 0.49 |
| 6 | TBLT is based on the student-centered instructional approach. | 4.23 | 0.96 |
| 7 | TBLT includes three stages: pre-task, task implementation, and post-task. | 4.44 | 0.56 |
| **Overall Mean** | | **4.49** | |

Reference Table 2:

The Means of the items related to the understanding of the concepts of Task Based Language Teaching clearly show that the teachers have good level of understanding of the concepts of TBLT. Moreover, lower SDs depict homogeneity in the responses in this particular section. The lowest SD is in the item 1 i.e., 0.48 that clearly shows that the responses are homogenous and almost the all the teachers have clear understanding of the task being communicative goal directed. Other statements which have low SDs are 2, 3, 5 and 7 with 0.52, 0.53, 0.49 and 0.56 SDs respectively. The SDs of all these statements are also quite low further establishing homogeneity in the responses. Almost all the teachers know that the primary focus of the task is on meaning (Item 2) and that a task always has a clearly defined outcome (Item 3). The teachers are very well aware of the fact that TBLT is consistent with the principles of CLT (Item 5).

## Teachers' Attitude towards the implementation of TBLT

**Table 3.**

| Item No. | Item | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|
| 8 | I have interest in implementing TBLT in the classroom. | 4.67 | 0.47 |
| 9 | TBLT provides a relaxed atmosphere to promote the target language use. | 4.20 | 0.90 |
| 10 | TBLT activates learners' needs and interests. | 4.36 | 0.48 |
| 11 | TBLT pursues the development of integrated skills in the classroom. | 4.18 | 0.86 |
| 12 | TBLT gives much psychological burden to teacher as a facilitator. | 2.60 | 1.17 |
| 13 | TBLT requires much preparation time compared to other approaches. | 3.97 | 0.82 |
| 14 | TBLT is proper for controlling classroom arrangements. | 3.79 | 0.85 |
| 15 | TBLT materials in textbooks are meaningful and purposeful based on the real-world context | 4.15 | 0.83 |
| **Overall Mean** | | **3.99** | |

Reference Table 3:

The attitude of the teachers towards implementing Task Based method in the classes is positive. The high mean scores for the items 8, 9 and 10 make it very clear that the teachers are willing to implement this method in the classroom to teach professional English language communication to the students of technical course like B.Tech. Low values of standard deviation in the items 8 and10 further establishes the homogeneity of the responses strengthening the conclusion that almost the teachers are comfortable in implementing TBLT. The lowest mean score in the items related to Attitude of the teachers is in Item no. 12 i.e., 2.60, which states that 'TBLT gives psychological burden to the teachers. The low mean score signifies that teachers do not agree with this statement leading to the conclusion that the teachers believe that this method doesn't give burden to them.

## Comparison of Means

The teachers' understanding of the concepts of TBLT method is quite good and their attitude towards implementing is also positive. Let's try to see now which aspect is stronger statistically - Understanding or Attitude. Looking at the overall means of both the aspects (Ref. Tables 2 & 3), it is clear that Understanding of the teachers is more strongly placed as compared to the attitude of the teachers.
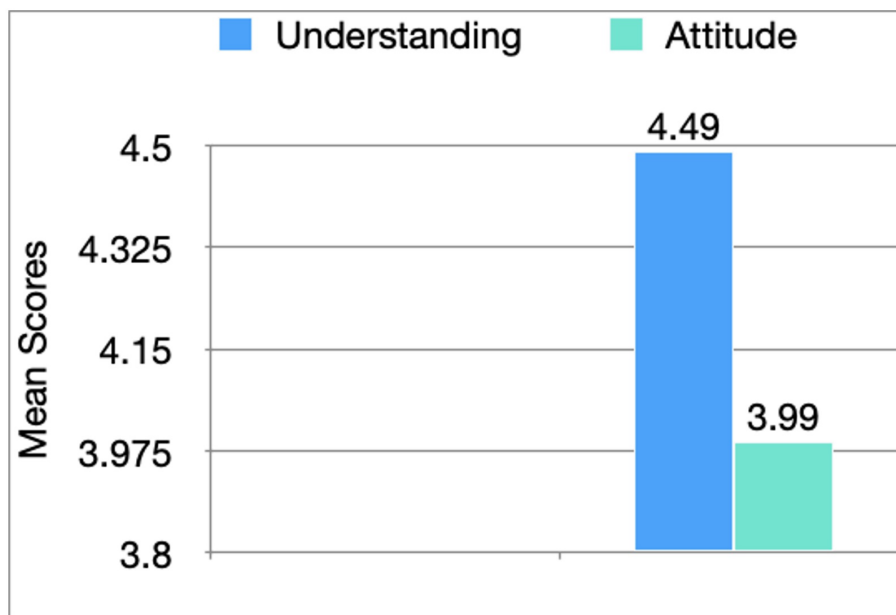


**Figure 1.** Overall Mean Score of statements related to understanding of the concepts of TBLT is 4.49 whereas the overall Mean Score of the statements related to the attitude of the communication teachers towards implementing TBLT method in the communication skills classrooms of technical colleges is 3.99. The mean values do surely tell that the understanding is more strongly placed than the attitude.

## Paired Sample T-Test Results

Paired Samples T-Test

| Measure 1 | | Measure 2 | t | df | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Understanding Descriptives | – | Attitude | 10.706 | 65 | < .001 |

| | N | Mean | SD | SE |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Understanding | 66 | 4.489 | 0.368 | 0.045 |
| Attitude | 66 | 3.993 | 0.258 | 0.032 |

**Descriptives Plots**

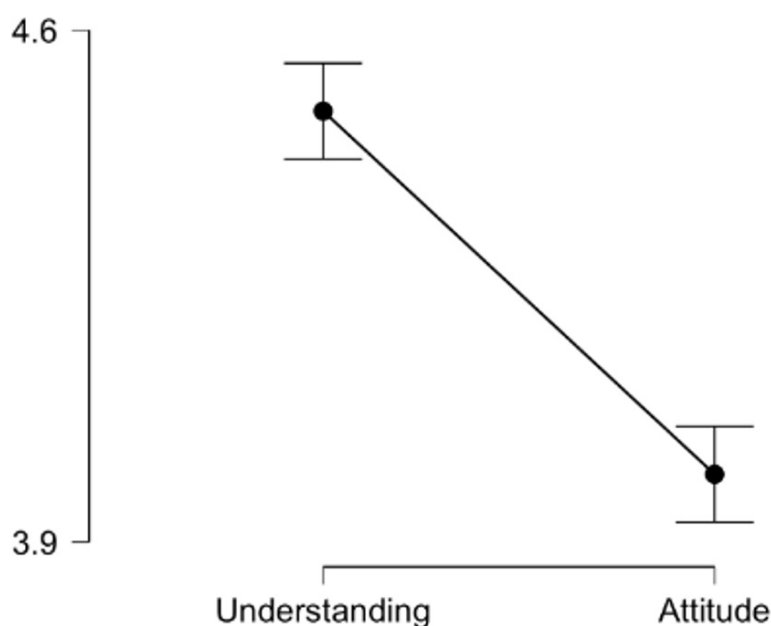**Understanding – Attitude**



**Figure 2.**

Value of $p$ = <0.001 i.e., smaller than 0.05

T observed = 10.706

T critical = 2.00 (T-Value table - df 65 and Confidence Level 95%)

**Observations**: T observed is greater than T critical

$p$ = <0.001

**Result**: The difference is significant.

## Conclusion

The responses to the items from 1 to 7 clearly suggest that the teachers have a reasonably good understanding of the basic concepts of Task Based Language Teaching method. They also have clear understanding of the tasks. They know the purpose and methods of creating relevant tasks for the learners. The transition towards Communicative Language

Teaching with specific emphasis on Task Based Language Teaching method hasn't been very smooth though. There is evidence that, particularly in the Indian context, the traditional grammar method is still being used. However, it is encouraging to see that most of the teachers have very good understanding of the TBLT method. The overall mean score (4.49) for the items related to 'Understanding' of the teachers of the concepts of TBLT method is quite high and very close to 'Strongly Agree'. Low Standard Deviation value of 0.37 suggests that the responses are very homogeneous further strengthening the result that almost all teachers have very good understanding go the concepts of TBLT.

The responses to the items from 8-15 clearly depict the positive attitude of the teachers towards implementing TBLT method in the language classrooms. Language teaching is a little different in technical colleges because it is done under the courses like professional communication or technical communication. However, the fact is that it is basically English language teaching in a professional setup. The communication skills teachers at technical colleges, who have been the respondents in this study, are quite positive about implementing Task Based Language Teaching method to teach English language communication skills to the engineering students. The mean overall score (3.9) for the items related to 'Attitude' of the teachers towards implementing TBLT method in communication classes in the technical colleges is close to 'Agree'. Low Standard Deviation value of 0.26 suggests that the responses are strongly homogeneous further establishing the result that almost all teachers have quite positive attitude towards implementing TBLT method in communication skills classes in engineering colleges.

Through the paired samples T-Test it was further found that the 'Understanding' is stronger that the 'Attitude'. The teachers' attitude towards implementing TBLT method, comparatively, is less strong than their understanding of the concepts of TBLT method. The difference between the two has come out to be 'significant'.

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*We don't have any conflicts of interests to disclose.*

## Footnotes

*National Capital Region (NCR) of India is a unique example of inter-state regional planning and development for a region with NCT-Delhi as its core. The NCR as notified covers the whole of NCT-Delhi and certain districts of Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, covering an area of about 55,083 sq. kms. The sub-region wise area details are as under: (Source: Official website of National Capital Region Planning Board, Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, Government of India, http://ncrpb.nic.in/ncrconstituent.html)

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