

Comments on Ranabir Samaddar & Snehasish Mitra: *Bridge of Spaces: East by Rear East, Ah! The Northeast*

Discussant: Debarati Bagchi, Transnational Research Group (Max Weber Foundation) Postdoctoral Fellow based at the Jawaharlal Nehru University.

In critically engaging with the Look East – Act East policies and their implications, the paper brings together a range of very important issues. I would try to tease out some of the important points and the conceptual framework that binds them together and then make a few suggestions.

By invoking the metaphor of the ‘bridge’ (which has a very obvious infrastructural connotation), the paper tries to connect some of the crucial questions associated with logistics in general and its implications in Northeast India in particular. It declares to examine the Look East-Act East policies as a ‘very particular mode’ of accumulation and postcolonial economic development. It does so by sketching a very detailed account of the political economy of resource extraction (like water, uranium, coal, rubber) and infrastructural and logistical development (roads/railways and the finance sector) in Northeast in relation to the contentious questions of ethnicity and identity politics. The study finally raises the necessity to address issues of ‘social governance’ to grasp the market logic that aspires to ‘open up’ a militarised and conflict induced enclave economy. To understand the particularity of such market logic, the paper concentrates on the geopolitical logic envisioned in these policies. ‘Bridge’ serves as a useful anchor for integrating the many issues that the paper aims to address. On the one hand, it enables a critique of policy rhetoric and ADB’s imagination of spatial connections by retaining and yet overturning the bridge metaphor. On the other, it exposes how spaces come to acquire meaning only through certain material links. Bridges make spaces, and yet preclude the ‘illusion of sovereign spatial identity’. The paper is an attempt to track this process and identify the exclusions it entails.

The study of the expansion of logistics and infrastructure is premised upon the question of land ownership. The paper discusses how the complex scenario of customary rights and community ownership of land poses challenge to the policy ambitions. Taking the three states of Nagaland, Manipur and Meghalaya as sites of study, the paper shows the region-specific patterns of land rights, the resulting variations in ethnic conflicts and how these led to new modes of governmentality. Thus, while the Indian state’s petroleum dream was challenged by the autonomy of LothaHoho that safeguards tribal rights over resources in Nagaland, in Manipur the nature and outcome of resistance was determined by the dual framework of land laws for hills and valleys. Talking of varied practices, it might be helpful to recall the ‘nineteenth century paradox’ that SanjibBaruah revisited in his study of the agrarian question in Assam. (SanjibBaruah (ed.). *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005)

At this point, and quite rightly so, the paper invokes the inner line issue. The Inner Line was designed to lend certain fixity to what was considered to be the natural distinction of hills and plains, sedentary and shifting, nontribal and tribal; in other words the world of capital and pre-capital. Calling it an ‘impossible line’, existing historical works show how it was flexibly altered as movement of capital required since the colonial times (Bodhisattva Kar, ‘When Was the Postcolonial? A History of Policing Impossible Lines’, in SanjibBaruah (ed.) *Beyond Counterinsurgency: Breaking the Impasse in Northeast India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 49-79). As the paper revisits the question of hill-valley jurisdictions and the renewed demand for Inner Line in recent times, a bit of tracing back will more clearly reveal what is particular about the postcolonial situation.

Interestingly, the paper does not stop at critiquing the idea of 'opening up' simply by drawing attention to the continuing peripheral existence of the Northeast. It actually further problematises the notion of the frontier by playing with directionalities. Quite provocatively, it argues that subsumed by the ever stretching eastward vision of capital, the Northeast will now become the new frontier of resources, the 'rear', for the East. At the same time, the paper shows how such a vision gets disrupted by the interplay of identities and spatial politics in postcolonial Northeast. The inside/outside binary occurs as a recurrent trope in the formulation of lines and bridges, connections and disruptions. I am reminded here of James Scott's much debated formulation of Zomia which identifies Southeast Asian Uplands as the anarchist territory that has been able to remain 'outside' the statist territory of governance (James C. Scott, *The Art of Not being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009). The paper observes how the Look East policy strategically identifies certain points as 'outside' (presumably the reach of so called 'development') only to legitimise their being linked up in order to fulfil the state's logistical ambitions. Such an argument has the potential to challenge the very foundation of Scott's idea of a pure 'outside' of state space, by showing that 'inside' and 'outside' are in fact statist categories.

Drawing from the above point, I would like to make a final suggestion. I think we need to take up the question of intellectual infrastructure seriously. To be more precise, we need to engage with the kind of spatial imaginings that the Area Studies framework has naturalised and institutionalised. If bridges make spaces, do these new spaces and shifting directionalities also help us question, revisit or defy the 'patrolling of intellectual borders' or do they produce newer borders? (see Willem van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 20 (2002), pp. 647-668.)