

# ***A Social Mapping of Infrastructure Logistics, and India's Look East Policy***

**September 1, 2016**

**Venue:**Sabghar 1, Swabhumi  
89 C, MaulanaAbulKalam Azad Sarani  
Kolkata, West Bengal 700054

The five segments studied in the workshop examined India's Look/Act East Policy in terms of logistic visions and infrastructural developments but also the many ways in which these failed to examine the larger story of extraction and the various population flows that followed these developments. It expanded the scope of the policy to examine how the location of Bangladesh as a disruption in India's land contiguity towards the Southeast opens possibilities of engagement but also the prospect of Kolkata as a logistic hub which is then examined in the background competing logistic visions in the east and west of India.

## **Session 1**

**10.00am -1.00pm**

**Chair: Prasanta Ray**

### **1. RanabirSamaddar&SnehasishMitra: *Bridge of Spaces: East by Rear East, Ah! The Northeast***

The first segment investigated components of the logistic visions and infrastructural developments related to India's Look East policy in terms of its connect to the Northeast. It argued that it is in the larger story of extraction of resources, logistical vision, and infrastructural (material and social) programmes under postcolonial capitalism and its interface with the neoliberal mode of governance that one finds clues to how spaces are bridged and in the process acquires new identities. Yet and as consequence of this, the paper seeks to suggest, there will be areas and hence spaces excluded from this bridging operation waiting for future logistical operation. That is how capitalism proceeded in the past, and will proceed now.

#### **Discussants:**

**DebaratiBagchi**, is Transnational Research Group (Max Weber Foundation) Postdoctoral Fellow based at the Jawaharlal Nehru University

**AnandaroopSen**, Centre for Historical Studies, JNU

**DebaratiBagchi** argued that 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 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. She argued that the study raised the necessity to address issues of 'social governance' in order to grasp the market logic that aspires to 'opening up' a militarised and conflict induced enclave economy. To understand the particularity of such market logic, the paper concentrated 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. The paper is an attempt to track this process and identify the exclusions it entails. She argues for the need to take up the question of intellectual infrastructure seriously. To be more precise, she argues, 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?

**Anandaroop Sen** argued that the negotiations between labour and capital have specific configurations depending on the *kind* of extraction in question. Questions of ownership, resistance can only be accessed when one is tuned into this reality. What happens if the community decides to deal directly with the resource extraction and actually participate in it? Will that right the wrong? It is impossible to get out of this bind unless one takes recourse to an idea of a vanguard where, if the community decided to get its proverbial hand dirty, it will be 'misrecognizing' the dynamic of capital. Where and when does such a community exist? He also questions where does the post colonial begin? The bridging idea, the idea of resource extraction, the construction of community, ideas of community property, all of these have their provenance in the British imperial world and how the North Eastern frontier featured in its extractive plantation economy. It is perhaps telling that the categories that organized the colonial imperial world like that of the unsullied tribe versus the rapacious outsider are still the dominant metaphors that control even critical works on the region. This is not to make a facetious point that everything that is happening now has already happened before and thus we should look at history. But to be attentive to the recurrence of certain problematics that have organized the way the region is thought and built as a bridge.

## 2. **Subir Bhaumik** : *Bangladesh: The Key to India's Look East*

The second segment questioned whether logistic questions in the East can be resolved without addressing various issues like that of Kolkata Port with two ports under its management, achieving synergy between Kolkata and Chittagong Ports, the logistics of water sharing, security cooperation, land corridor of Bangladesh with Nepal, reviving earlier inland water navigation routes as also stabilizing relations with Burma and China independent of US strategic preference. It also examined the tortuous history of settling the "Bengal question" as congealed in the "Chicken's neck" which must then necessarily engage with issues of immigration, trafficking in goods, services, labour and sex, securitization, land grab, and development of Siliguri as a hub.

**Discussant: Gurudas Das**, Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences National Institute of Technology, Silchar

**Gurudas Das** argued that since the Northeast is the bridgehead to South east Asia, her development interest can be dovetailed with the broader policy framework. When we say

“Bangladesh is the key to the success of India’s Look East Policy”, we assign centrality of India’s Northeast into India’s Look East Policy—which is not the case. This deliberation could aptly be titled as “Bangladesh: Key to national policy towards India’s Northeast”. Does “Bangladesh Corridor” matter for the success of India’s Look East Policy? He argues that the Continental Route to South East Asia is not cost effective for mainland India. As a result, even if Bangladesh Corridor is made available, Maritime Route will always have cost advantage over the Continental Route. Thus, “Bangladesh Corridor” has nothing to do with the success or failure of India’s Look East Policy. However, access to Bangladesh Corridor is extremely important for transporting goods between two parts of India: Mainland and North Eastern Region (NER). In fact provision of transit corridor to India is more of a strategic issue for Bangladesh. Bangladesh’s India policy could not be well understood without the China factor. Bangladeshi militaristic security doctrine views that Bangladesh will be only gain if China continues to grow at the present rate and eventually become the major Asian power. The futuristic strategic doctrine coupled with the captive market argument perhaps explain why in spite of having a friendly Awami League government since 2009 Bangladesh has not yet been able to close a deal on providing transit routes to India which could act as the life line for the Northeastern Region.

### **3. Samir K. Purkayastha and SucharitaSengupta: *Borders, Mobility and Migration: North East India***

The third segment complimented the first and looked at migration, displacement, insurgency and labour produced as a result of the above mentioned vision of logistical governance. It addressed what happens to population flow and control over resources within the context of the Look East/Act East Policy heralded as being transformative for the region. While deregulation of borders leads to a barrier free integration of regions through trade and communication, there remains the need to investigate whether the same holds for movement of people particularly movements that fall outside the purview of law. How do conflicts surrounding ‘outsiders’ or ‘alien bodies’ unfold? Similarly what is the complex relation between the inflow of capital and outflow of labour?

**Discussant:SanjoyBarbora.** Associate Professor, Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Guwahati.

**SanjoyBarborabegan** by focusing on the segment on*Colonial History of flows and Races in the Northeast*: He argued that the authors have to ask why this section needs to begin with the usual mining of literature on the migration narrative in the region.While on the subject, it might be useful to avoid a very dated historical description of migration by imagining that one were to present this text among communities being written about. He then moves to the section on *Migrant: Who?* He notes that this is an extremely important section and one suggestion would be to begin the essay with this section. The creative use of quantitative data (NSSO etc.) is a good strategy but the authors might want to explain some of the statistically insignificant, but symbolically profound data that emerges from the data set. This is particularly true in the case of the data that has come from the hill states of the region.

## Session 2

2.00-4.00pm

Chair: Gurudas Das

### 4. ImanMitra and Mithilesh Kumar : *Kolkata as a Logistic Hub with special reference to the port*

The fourth segment examined ways in which Kolkata (with its location as a port, railway, and road hub) could become crucial for the new logistical vision and how the existence of Bangladesh as a disruption in India's land continuity predicated the possibilities of Kolkata as a logistical centre. Being one of the most populated and economically developed cities in India, Kolkata possesses a unique advantage as regards realisation of the Look East Policy and the paper examines this advantage along three interlinked axes: history, infrastructure and location.

**Discussant: RitajyotiBandyopadhyay**, Assistant Professor, Indian Institute of Science, Education and Research, Mohali.

**RitajyotiBandyopadhyay** argued that Calcutta's logistical future lies in the protracted economic crises and regime instabilities that India's potential South East Asian partners faced since the late 1990s, and could never recover fully in the succeeding two decades. The crisis of the 1990s hit India's look east policy hard. He wanted the authors to take note of this aspect in the revised version of the paper. Second, he wanted the authors to consider explaining the meaning of the logistical hub in the Toyotist regime of capitalist accumulation. This leads to the third insistence that the authors will also study the changing labour process in the port to tease out what the birth of the increasingly containerized logistical hub means to the workers. What is needed, then, is the rigorous politicization of the idea of the logistical hub. After Timothy Mitchell (2014) we can say that its apparent durability could also be the source of its speculative fragility. We need to think how the logistical hub can be a focus of our collective existence.

### 5. Anita Sengupta : *Being Connected: Logistic Visions to the East and West*

The fifth segment made a comprehensive assessment of India's logistic visions to the East and the West in the light of other competing logistic visions, the One Belt One Road but also the US strategy of Pivot of Asia and Russian Eurasian visions. It questioned whether a logistical vision on India's East can be realized to any appreciable extent without a complementary design on India's west and northwest

**Discussant: Sanjay Chaturvedi**, Coordinator, Centre of Advanced Study (UGC SAP) Department of Political Science (Centre for the Study of Geopolitics) & Honorary Director Centre for the Study of Mid-West and Central Asia, Panjab University, Chandigarh

**Sanjay Chaturvedi** began by questioning what constitutes India's extended --and extending-- neighborhood? After all there is a complex geography (political, social-cultural and economic) and history (e.g. Indian Ocean World) to India's neighborhood and its extensions to north, south, east, west. What kind of logistic visions are emerging in India's extended neighborhoods? *Who* (i.e. actors and agencies) and *what* (i.e. logics, hopes, fears) are driving these logistic visions? What is the extent to which they converge or diverge? What is common

to them? Can we take the translation of these 'logistic visions' into 'strategic spaces' for granted? Can we assume in an unproblematic manner that these logistic visions, after being turned into logistic spaces, will lead to reconfiguration and rethinking of Asian borders (both physical and mental) as well as conventional understanding of Westphalian territorial sovereignty? Asia is not a part of 'post-Schengen' world --if at all one such world exists-- yet. It is to state the obvious perhaps that questions posed above can be answered in a serious and systematic manner only with the help of carefully chosen case studies, that would permit a theoretically informed empirical engagement. The emphasis placed by the CRG project on 'social mapping' of 'logistic spaces' is most strategic in the sense that it insists on not losing sight of place-specific social-political and cultural geographies in the imaginative metageographies of 'Connectography'. It is useful to bear in mind that the success of Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) is by no means a foregone conclusion and a great deal of uncertainty and confusion surrounds its future. Serious concerns over the ecological and social impacts of connectivity/logistics seem to be clouding the futures of a 'China centered trade network' and Russian lead economic community'. India's 'Act East' policy in newly carved out 'Indo-Pacific' space is yet another 'work in progress' that awaits further conceptual clarity and highly desirable policy consensus among a large number of stakeholders including sub-regions, cities, ports, civil society actors and nodal agencies. Beyond the metaphor of 'Tugs of War' lies a rather complex labyrinth of agencies, interests and agendas with entangled logics

#### **4.00- Summing up and vote of thanks**

The workshop closed with a reminder to the researchers to submit their revised drafts by 15 October for a final review and then publication as Policies and Practices.