

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

**February 29, 2016**

**Venue:** Sabhaghar 1, Swabhumi  
89 C, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Sarani  
Kolkata, West Bengal 700054

**9.30 AM–11.00 AM: Session 1**

**Chair: Subhas Ranjan Chakraborty**

- a. Resources and Infrastructure in the Northeast & India's Look East and Act East Policy: **Ranabir Samaddar & Snehasish Mitra**

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

India introduced *Look East* policy in the early 1990s. It became *Act East* policy with the change in government and almost simultaneously with the US declaration of its policy of *Pivot of Asia*. The new policy signals a more proactive role for India in this region combining strategic, military, trade, and economic cooperation. It also signals the collaboration between India and countries like Japan and Australia to balance the increasing influence of China in the Southeast Asian region. The idea is to develop the north east as a frontier for the thrust eastwards both in terms of political imagination and logistical implications. It is in this background that the paper will seek to examine the extraction and infrastructural activities in the region in the last fifteen–twenty years. On the basis of this mapping, it would examine the relation between *Look* and *Act East policies* of the Indian state and the specific developmental policies in this region. It would also look into the relations between trade, neo–liberalism, greater connectivity, and India's *Look* and *Act East* policies and Examine the relation between the various components of *Look* and *Act East* policy. Finally, it would focus on the type of social governance emerging in this region as a bridge between a security–centric policy towards the region to a more trade–oriented policy with resource extraction and expanded infrastructure as the basis.

The **expert discussant** began his comment by saying that it is important to locate the current resources and infrastructure in Northeast India in relation to the government's Look East and Act East Policy (LEAEP), as a process that is in consonance with earlier colonial policies of resource extraction. However, it might be useful to spell out how the mapping will be done. In this context it would also be useful to examine how the state and central governments react to the policy and attempt a comparative examination of similar processes in other countries of Asia. A comparable case, he argued, was Indonesia. The authors could be more explicit about the sources of information for each question especially the last research question, since it has the potential to bring in a fresh, nuanced perspective on LEAEP

b. **Bangladesh: The Key to India's Look East- SubirBhaumik**

**Discussant: AtigGhosh** Assistant Professor, ViswaBharati University, Santiniketan

India's Look East policy, now upgraded as 'Act East' by PM NarendraModi, calls for a double look east. To make it successful and achieve its purpose of situating the countries under-developed and conflict laden Northeastern states at the heart of its robust engagement with South-east Asia and possibly China, India needs to first look east from its mainland to Bangladesh. Bangladesh is crucial to India for connecting its mainland to its Northeast, linked by land through a tenuous 21-kms wide Siliguri corridor, often derided as a "Chicken's Neck". Dhaka's decision to allow transit of goods through its territory to Northeast from Indian mainland was a game changer. The presenter argued that if India can firm up its access to Northeast through Bangladesh, the next stage of 'Look East' to link up to south-east Asia and China would work. India is therefore prioritizing linking to Northeast through Bangladesh avoiding the 'Siliguri corridor' much as China is seeking to avoid the Malacca straits. It would be important to focus on how India and Bangladesh are trying to turn the 'Chicken Neck' into an asset rather than a liability by the recent opening of the Banglabandha-Phulbari check post that would help Bangladesh access the Siliguri Corridor to link up to Nepal, Bhutan and Upper Northeast India. It would also seek to answer why and how connectivity through Bangladesh is the key to success of India's Look East; the possible pitfalls in India-Bangladesh bilateral

relations that can threaten the forward movement towards Look East; the present state of India–Bangladesh relations and the progress in connectivity; the crucial role of states in promoting this bilateral relations – the key role of Tripura in promoting this relationship and the gains it has faced as against other states who are yet to warm up to Bangladesh. Finally, it would be important to explore the linkages between security and connectivity in India–Bangladesh relations and its impact on India’s Look east. The quid pro quo factor would be how Bangladesh looks to using Indian territory to link up to the Himalayan nations like Nepal and Bhutan ,specially for power, in lieu of allowing India to connect to its Northeast through Bangladesh. In the course of this it would be important to look at how initiatives like “border haats” would help strengthen bilateral relations by widening the ambit of stakeholders to frontier regions which provide scope for wider connectivity but often end up as regions of conflict due to myopic security–driven state policies.

The **expert discussant** began by noting that it would be worthwhile to take into account whether the northeast wants to be subsumed within the Look East Act East Policy. He also questioned whether the importance of the Siliguri Corridor has been reduced to the extent argued by the presenter.

c. **Interrogating Migration in India’s Northeast– Samir K. Purkayastha and SucharitaSengupta**

**Discussant: MeghnaGuhaThakurta***Executive Director, Research Initiatives, Bangladesh*

The presenters noted that the paper is an attempt to understand the intricacy and dynamics of mobility and migration in the northeast India amidst a transitional economy. It would critically explore the dilemmas of a fragile state, the implications of the sudden surge in “development” on population flows across borders– both legal and illegal– displacement if any in wake of the new governance and the identity of a migrant labour vis–à–vis the indigenous communities. In two separate sections, the paper would also attempt to map migration from Myanmar and Bangladesh, two extremely important countries in securing India’s ties with the ASEAN countries. Any study on migration in the Northeast would remain

incomplete without an account of the interface between trade (both legal and illegal) across the border and the nexus between trafficking and smuggling that operates in border districts. Migration and trafficking of goods and human are interlinked in South Asia, and the Northeast is no exception. In this background the paper will seek to explore mapping migration [both inflow and outflow] and push and pull factors of migration in the entire region especially following the Look East Policy, with a focus on India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. It would inquire into how the issue of migration coupled with issues such as trafficking, smuggling or contraband trade in the region is governed so that it does not hinder the new mode of social governance that the state has adopted over the years. It would also explore the relationship between two processes– unrestricted flow of goods and controlled mobility of people and labour– whether they go hand in hand or work independently of each other. It will also question whether trade and economic growth would be a precursor to peace and security in the region or harbinger of further conflicts and the possibilities of frictions arising out of differing cultural perceptions.

The **expert discussant** noted that one needs to understand that beyond the negativity that migration necessarily implies there is need to look at different types of borderland relationships between communities. This she illustrated with the case of the Myanmar–Bangladesh border where a flourishing trade in gems was carried out at the border through the provision of 48 hour visa issued to Bangladeshi citizens. Ground realities are therefore often different from central policies and people’s perspectives often override state suspicions. In the process of the examination it would also be important to take note of both global developments, the increasing western interest as well as various local developments. She also suggested that it would possibly be useful to identify certain sectors of movements for mapping.

### **General Discussion on the three presentations**

Sanjoy Barbora opened the discussion by arguing that since mapping was an important part of this section the questions revolved around how and where the mapping would be conducted since in the last analysis this would determine the outcome of the final papers. It would also make the

difference between public perceptions of issues and a social science one. Paula Banerjee argued that along with this it was necessary to identify the migrant that one was talking about and here it would be particularly important to refer to the 'woman' as a migrant. Bodhisatta Kar argued that one needs to take note of the politics of access when one talks about the development of infrastructure of any region. One would also have to take into account the extent to which infrastructure takes note of social diversity and the directionality of capital. Ranabir Samaddar responded by noting that in any discussion on logistics and infrastructure it would be necessary to take note of the intricacy of capital accumulation. It would also be important to understand that policy making itself is a multilayered affair where local voices interact with state initiatives.

**11.30AM– 1.00 PM: Session 2**

**Chair: Shyamalendu Majumdar**

**a. Kolkata as a Logistic Hub with special reference to the port – Iman Mitra and Mithilesh Kumar**

**Discussant: Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay** Assistant Professor, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Kolkata.

The research proposal attempted to situate Kolkata along the axes of history, infrastructure and location. Calcutta (it became Kolkata officially only in 2001) was the first capital of British India and the oldest riverine port in the country. Its history of urbanization is replete with narratives that explain the centrality of its geopolitical importance in the spread of colonialism. The mercantile networks that specialized in trade of indigo, tea and opium in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries soon led to forceful encroachment and toppling of independent rulers in the surrounding region. It also worked as a pivot in the infrastructural developments including improvement in communication and transport facilities, not only within the eastern parts of the country, but also extending up to the far east of the British empire. There is also a need to critically explore the recurrent claims that the Kolkata Port is dying because of difficulties in pilotage and drafting. However, having a look at its annual Administrative Report of its managing authority – the Kolkata Port Trust – for the year 2013–14, one

may sense an ongoing process of recuperation: currently the Kolkata Port is ranked third among all Indian major ports in terms of container traffic handling; it is ranked second in terms of growth in handling both iron ore and fertilizer and third in terms of handling the raw materials for fertilizer among all the ports in the country. Also, Kolkata is ranked first in terms of the number of vessels handled during the financial year of 2013–14 (17.1% of the total number of vessels handled in all Indian ports) Having set the context of the proposed study on Kolkata as a logistical hub with special emphasis to its port system, the authors summarised the concern that they attempted to attend in the course of this research. The vision of Kolkata as a logistical hub rests on its locational advantage, history of infrastructural accumulation and increasing potential as a transnational nodal point in the new Silk Route. It is to be seen how this vision is actualized by negotiating with the tension between Bangladesh and India/West Bengal on questions of water sharing through the Farakka Barrage and projected ‘security risks’ emanating in the region. The main emphasis of this research will be on the links between realization of the infrastructural networks and built-in capital and geopolitical negotiations that may facilitate or hinder such moments of realization. We shall attempt to situate this issue along the following broader theoretical question: what are the differences and connections between the imagination and materialization of logistical visions in the shared colonial past of the region and the postcolonial Look East Policy that seemingly takes account, makes use and replicates the same vision to an extent.

The **expert discussant** suggested the need to focus on history, infrastructure and location of Kolkata. He argued that the study should be grounded on Bay of Bengal studies which lost relevance with fall of British dominance and economic depression. Even in an 1895 report, it was stated that in Khiderpore dock half of the containers were empty. Income of the port trust used to fluctuate, for instance import of rice from Burma during Second World War increased the revenue of the port. The questions/suggestions are:

1. How seriously can the profit figures of the port trust can be taken, unless a comparative study is taken?
2. The Kolkata port is dependent on river system which brings in the question of water dealings with Bangladesh. Issues of climate change, ‘Look East’

policy and sustainability of vulnerable coast people can be considered in the study.

3. Further investigation of the 'Operation Sunshine' in 1996 which facilitated hawker eviction as it is considered as a collateral damage of the 'Look East' policy.
4. To locate the difference between colonial and logistical imaginations.

In the course of the discussions Subir Bhaumik argued for the need to link the study with deep sea port logistics of Bangladesh. Ranabir Samaddar questioned the role of planning behind the city and stressed on public behavior and imagination in the manifestation the present state of the city. He argued that trade and business also had a significant role to play in the development of the city. Sanjay Barbora pointed to the similarity of airports, urban aesthetic imagination of Kolkata and Kunming. Paula Banerjee argued for taking note of the airport as a site of logistics and trade in the research.

**b. Being Connected: Logistic Visions to the East and West of India– Anita Sengupta**

**Discussants – Binoda Mishra**, Director CSIRD, Kolkata

**Suchandana Chatterjee**, Honorary Associate, China Centre, Calcutta University, Kolkata.

The presentation began from the point where the last presenter had concluded on the note Kolkata has the potential to be a transnational nodal point along the new Silk Road. The actualization of this would be based not just on the economics of the vision but also on geopolitical considerations. It was at this point that the presenter intervened to take the argument further by underlining that the materialization of the logistic vision would be dependent on its ability to connect with the broader Asian (sometimes competing) logistic visions to India's East and West. Logistics is integral to both the material and cultural aspects of connectivity and the dynamics generated by contesting logistic visions is likely to create competing networks that will reconfigure the way in which a particular 'regional' logistic hub is conceptualised as logistics and transportation appear as prominent vehicles to implement and develop strong links. While there are various logistic visions the Indian alternative has been to focus on the eastern and western reaches of the Indian Ocean and the sub continental

landmass south of Eurasia but linked to it. The 'Connect Central Asia' initiative has to be viewed within this context where both the traditional continental trade routes and the maritime multi modal routes would come into play. There also remains the alternative to connect Indian initiatives with other existing (like Turkey–Iran–Pakistan railway) or proposed routes (branches of the Silk Road Economic Belt). A multi modal link to Central Asia through the Iranian port of Chahbahar could then link through existing and newer links to Russia and Europe. These include both transport corridors like the INSTC and pipeline projects like TAPI. The potential for both if linked to the South East Asian states would be manifold. Similarly the BCIM corridor could link to a broader Asian network. The development of a network of Indian Ocean ports to serve as regional shipping hubs for littoral states with connecting highways and rail routes would mean leveraging India's location in one of the most strategic stretches of ocean space. The launching of a Spice Route, Cotton Route and the Mausam Project, all of which are attempts to tie together countries around the Indian Ocean assumes significant in this context.

In this background the final presentation will focus on the following aspects. Will logistics determine the future definition of 'areas'/ 'regions' and 'regional' interaction? Do current trends indicate that states like China and India are moving towards a Mackinderian position in terms of logistics, combining continental and maritime dimensions through multi modal corridors? Will logistics and infrastructure development (rather than security arrangements) become the new marker of carving out realms of influence? If so how far has the Indian initiative in the north east succeeded? Where logistic visions and ideas overlap (a branch of the OBOR is the BCIM corridor which connects Yunnan to Myanmar, Bangladesh and eastern India) will the logic of logistics override political compulsions? How will global developments (the Iranian nuclear deal and the opening of Iran, the synergy between Russia and China, Russia's renewed interests in the Middle East and its failing economy, the fall of the rouble on Central Asian economies, the continuing problems of transition in Afghanistan and India's problematic relations with its neighbours) affect the outcome of the logistic vision.

The **first expert discussant** noted that strategic vision of countries besides logistics needs to be considered. It would also be important to locate the



pattern of maritime trade of China's expansion. India is comparatively less excited than China regarding the maritime trade due to apprehensions about the security of its own ports.

The **second expert discussant** sent a formal note defining the extension of this logistic and cultural vision to Mongolia, Tibet and the Far East.

In the course of the discussions Subir Bhaumik noted that China is looking for land to sea access through India, to avoid the narrow Malacca Strait wherein northeast India can play a pivotal role. Chinese military heads may not be in the same wavelength as Chinese state. Meghna Guhathakurta suggested that the study may look into the idea of the Chinese state to utilize the Chinese diaspora for its geopolitical imagination and logistical culmination.

**2.00 PM – 3.00PM: General discussion on the theme moderated by Ranabir Samaddar**

The round table was an attempt to extend the discussion on logistics by focusing on linkages to the West and East of India.

**Priya Singh** began the discussion by noting that there have been longstanding historical and economic linkages between India and West Asia. However, Indian policy-making has not taken significant, concerted efforts towards intensifying this promising engagement. Despite the vital importance of West Asia for India, India has been rather reluctant to offer significant political and diplomatic vigour towards the region. In fact, an 'ignore west,' policy has been practised by the previous political dispensations. A 'Look West Policy' (LWP) like India's well-known 'Look East Policy' has often been articulated, but there has not been formalised in an institutional sense. The present government has proposed that India should not only 'Look East' but also 'Link West.' The Prime Minister initially referred to it at the 'Make in India' conference in Delhi and repeated it again in his first prime ministerial visit to the United States. India appears to be strengthening its high-level government to government contacts with all the countries in West Asia keeping in view the sizeable diaspora, energy and security interests in the region. This reflects the continuation in the trend of

India's continued strategic engagement with this vital region. The prospective 'Link West' policy could begin to address the growing demands for Indian attention from the region. At the same time, the new policy will have to contend with the new ruptures within the Middle East and North Africa—between Saudi Arabia and Iran as well as the Sunni-Shia divide. In a broader sense, the region has entered into a period of intense instability in which traditional groupings and partnerships are crumbling. The situation calls for greater Indian engagement in the region, with all the major countries in the region—from Turkey to Iran and Egypt to Saudi Arabia.

The region accommodates about 7 million Indians, who contribute around US\$ 40 billion in remittances annually. India's economic and commercial engagement with the region is around US\$ 186 billion per annum (2013–14), making it the largest trading regional block. The region is a source for more than 60 per cent of India's oil and gas requirement. Proposed projects such as the Oman-India Pipeline, an undersea gas pipeline – that Iran too has conveyed interest in – look encouraging. The Maghreb region is a major source of phosphate and other fertilizers. The Gulf countries can offer significant platform for operations of Indian companies, particularly in infrastructure, important for the country's socio-economic development and other national initiatives like 'Make in India' 'Digital India' 'Smart Cities', etc. There is increased air connectivity and India has also been participating in important UN Peace Keeping Missions in the region especially in Lebanon, Syria and South Sudan. Be it trade or energy supply routes, or even national security, the significance of an effective maritime security infrastructure in the Indian Ocean is critical for providing safety and stability in the region. There have been many debates on the concept of the 'Indo-Pacific' to boost connectivities between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. The two regions already have robust connectivities, but more can be done. However, if this concept of the Indo-Pacific has to become a reality, there is a need for enhanced cooperation in various areas among the key players in each region, before connecting the regions. Eventually, the LWP and the LEP could lay the foundations for the realisation of the 'Indo-Pacific.'

**SrimantiSarkar** argued that as India's Look East Policy (LEP) attempts to improvise itself as 'Act East Policy' under the present political dispensation in India—a careful re-assessment of the same will be interesting. The

means by which the LEP can be re-‘activated’ needs to be explored. The paper will try to argue that sub-regional initiatives form a viable means which can bring about this qualitative transformation.

South Asia is a region of great diversity, which, in spite of being abundantly rich in terms of history, civilization, geographical location and natural resources remains largely under-explored. It is also noticeably the least integrated region of the world. This calls for a pro-active role on part of the countries of South Asia to transform the region into a cohesive and progressive zone. The need for ‘cooperative regionalism’ (David K. Hamilton, 2013) finds relevance and significance in this regard. While a range of regional groupings have evolved with the agenda to foster effective regional cooperation—‘integration’, in true sense of term, has remained problematic. Social, economic and political factors conjugated by strenuous geo-strategic concerns jeopardize the smooth progression of such cooperative measures. As a result, there has been a consistent search for alternative ways of regional cooperation.

Lessons from the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) reiterated the futility of larger regional groupings in delivering promised outcomes. For instance, SAARC’s major objective to establish a South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), though officially in existence since 2004, still has not been achieved. Contrarily, sub-regional initiatives are gaining traction over larger arrangements. Premised on the principles of functionalism, ‘sub-regionalism’ appears to be more effective in addressing immediate concerns of the neighbouring countries. One may site the example of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) or the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC) which has been trying to play a considerable role in advancing sub-regional cooperation in the South and Southeast Asian region respectively. The Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) Initiative—a new entrant in the group of regional cooperative organizations—is another such initiative which aims at promoting sub-regional economic cooperation.

The Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in his speech at the 18<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit in Kathmandu, on November 2014 stated that—“regional integration in South Asia would go ahead through SAARC or outside it, among all of us or some of us”. His statement clearly hints at the shifted key loci of regional integration away from the broader concept of

'regionalism' per se to the specific context of 'sub-regionalism'. However, one cannot be over optimistic about such a proposition to see visible results without proper policy planning. If compared along a common line the sub-regional cooperative organizations like BIMSTEC, BCIM or the BBIN seem to be all working upon areas which both compliment and overlap each other. They are all sector-driven cooperative organizations which aim to work upon specifically identified functional areas of cooperation like trade, transport, technology, energy, tourism, water, climate change or environment related issues. They address the need to implement infrastructural projects, create functional institutions and arrange meetings for stakeholders' to discuss upon, what one may call, the 'logistical' issues in general. But one cannot over-emphasize the success of such initiatives as most of them face the challenge of disinclined follow-up at the governmental level. The BCIM for instance had being assertive in advocating a multi-modal corridor from Kolkata to Kunming (K2K) through Bangladesh and Myanmar. But no substantial breakthrough could be observed ever since the BCIM Car Rally (2013) exploring the K2K road connectivity had taken place. The BBIN agenda, on the other hand, while endorsing the idea of a 'South Asian Growth Quadrangle' (SAGQ) had being successful in signing the Motor Vehicle Agreement (MVA) between the BBIN countries which is likely to boost commercial ties and facilitate cross-border movement of vehicles by proposing seamless connectivity of passengers and vehicles through roadways in these countries.

Thus, while India's LEP attempts to revitalize itself, it is important to systematically review the functioning of the sub-regional initiatives that already exists, without unnecessarily promoting mere multiplication of such processes in numbers. For making them functionally more productive, it is significant to lay down a clear roadmap for the each such initiatives with well defined areas of overlap and gaps. Since, all seem to focus on similar developmental aspects of regional cooperation, it is important to streamline and measure one against another on a comparative scale; against the already existing polices and projects that are at various levels of implementation; and against the de-limited geographical area. Also the selective inclusion and exclusion of regional partners (for instance, while the BCIM includes Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar the BBIN chooses to exclude China and Myanmar) from such regional groupings is a matter of geo-strategic significance which calls for a close reflection. This can in turn

help develop the much required political will to ensure proper implementation of the proposed ideas and in make sub-regional organizations a viable tool to make India LEP to flourish.

**Debarati Bagchi** began with the comment that Look East or Act East was essentially about connectivity. And this connectivity was effective at various levels ----roads/rails/air connectivity but also pipelines. She also noted that looking and acting east were also policies on the part of the policy makers. As an interesting example of logistics determining official policy she talked about the transfer of Sylhet between Bengal and Assam and apprehensions about what would happen to rail connections with these transfers. She also underlined that in addition to this legal flux and flexibility one should take note of how connectivity links to intellectual networking and multi directional politics.

**Bodhisatta Karspoke** about the perceived tensions between connectivity and security that pervades the political rhetoric. He argued that this was the result of the commodification of security and that it was time to delink this binary. In this connection, the extent to which connectivity undermines securitization is important. A whole set of scales determine the connection between infrastructure and superstructure and it is equally important to take note of events where logistics has faced resistance from people. So the development of alternative logistics at the borders is crucial.

The round table also took note of Ranabir Samaddar's point of the urban nature of popular movements and he underlined the fact that there is need to take note the urban turn in protests. In particular studies that connected the protests of the 1950's to the last few years of the left rule in Bengal would be useful.