

Abstracts

Resources and Infrastructure in the Northeast & India's Look East and Act East Policy

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A. Background

1. Following up on India's *Look East* policy introduced in the early 1990s by the Indian government, the new Indian government announced *Act East* policy almost simultaneously with the US declaration of its policy of *pivot of Asia*. The *Look East* policy evolved into a tool for greater economic engagement with its eastern neighbours, and forging strategic partnerships and security cooperation with countries of Southeast Asia and Far East, such as Vietnam and Japan. Following up on that, the new Indian government has decided to focus more on improving relation with ASEAN and the East Asian countries. Possibly the new policy besides containing an element of hyperbole 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. Implementation of the *Act East Policy* aims to bolster its ties with the region. At the 2014 India-ASEAN and East Asia summits, India stressed freedom of navigation with regard to the South China Sea. In June 2015, India also sent a four-ship naval flotilla to Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Australia, as part of a visit to the South China Sea. Even the *Look East* policy had security component. It was then more aimed at finishing once and for all the insurgency problem in the Northeast by way of opening up the region to Southeast Asia beginning from Burma and stretching up to Vietnam and covering the archipelagos of Indonesia, Philippines, and other islands in the region. Sea and land in this way promised to become interlocked elements in India's thrust eastward. In short the *Look East and Act East policies* have had military, political, and economic components.

B. Northeast as a Frontier and the Extraction of Resources

2. India's northeast in this way became a frontier for the thrust eastward, both in terms of political imagination and logistical implications. Comprising eight states, the region shares border with Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, China and Myanmar. Over the decades since India's independence the northeast region had been deemed as underdeveloped, backward, and strife torn with ethno-militant violence. The region is one of the six biodiversity hotspots of the world, given its possession of abundant natural resources. The resources have provided sustenance to both indigenous and migrant communities, while serving as objects of extraction for British and Indian states. Tea, timber, and crude oil were the main resources which went into colonial accumulation, while post independence focus has gradually moved to additional resources like water (for hydroelectricity), uranium, coal, rubber plantation

and jatropha plantation. Given the geopolitical location of the region the recent focus of the Indian state on the Northeast hinges on its agenda of expansion of bilateral ties with its eastern neighbours. As a result there has been an emphasis on developing the infrastructure of the region through widening roads, expanding air connectivity, extending railway networks, opening new and reactivating old dormant trade routes, and facilitating border trade and transit points. Such activities have serious implications on the use and extraction of resources of the region, along with occasioning changes in the composition of the labour market and mobility. Therein lies the need to understand the changes which the region would undergo, and locate the relation between recent events and relevant changes

3. Northeast India's tryst with 'development' trajectory of the British and Indian state has involved extraction of resources accompanied by altering environmental landscapes, land relations and massive displacement of the indigenous communities. Shifting cultivation practiced by the indigenous communities in the hills in particular has been a sore point to the state. Successive postcolonial regimes have deliberately sponsored through institutionalized support in various forms alteration of the shifting cultivation regime in states like Mizoram and Tripura as a weapon against insurgent activities also. This transition has taken place across the Northeast where pattern of resource extraction has shifted from self subsistence to accumulation in market economy. Hydroelectricity is a serious bone of contention in the region. The Lower Subansiri dam (Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border) and Tipaimukh Dam (Manipur) have faced protests and oppositions from local communities and organizations, which apprehend massive displacement, associated with the development projects of the region such as Uiam Dam, Bongaigaon oil refinery, Indian Institute of Technology (Guwahati) etc. Resource extraction also impacts on the local communities if one takes note of the controversy relating to uranium mining in the West Khasi Hills of Meghalaya. The government-owned Uranium Corporation of India has for long been trying to get access to the deposits of uranium, but has failed due to local opposition. A reasonable proposition for some, there is also a strong opposition to this on grounds of public health, local autonomy, and indigenous rights. Meghalaya has been a notorious site for rat hole coal mining which often brings up labour and environmental concerns; Margherita, a small town in Upper Assam is also 'famous' for similar reasons. A new plantation practice in the northeast region is Jatropha. Jatropha plantation was started in the region in 2007, mostly at the level of small farmers with direct and indirect initiatives of the government and the private sector. However, adoption and expansion of jatropha plantation in the rural areas largely depend on profitability from such plantations at farmers.
4. In this context there has been a renewed thrust in the infrastructural development in northeast India in recent times besides the much talked about Asian Highway: Mairang-Guwahati Airport Road, Phulbari Tura Road, broadening of Shillong-Guwahati highway to name a few. Railway networks are being reformed and expanded, broad gauge conversion of Lumding-Silchar rail track, rail tracks between Dudhnoi (Assam) and Mendipathar (Meghalaya) and rail tracks extension till Naharlagun (in Arunachal Pradesh) are some of the new developments. While rails and roads connect places and enhances population mobility, there is a sense of apprehension that such measures are executed with the agenda of siphoning off further resources from the region. The ongoing activities and the prospect of many more such projects inevitably involve mechanisms to extract further resources, with implications on local labour market which brings us to the issues of labour rights, labour security, mobility, and migration. Also towns like Moreh have become the nodes of a different kind of eastern connectivity.
5. In the context of neo-liberal resource development policies, which include extraction, new trade routes, and infrastructural works, migration has emerged as a contentious issue in the

northeast region along ethnic lines and property ownerships. Several communities, especially Bengali Muslims and Adivasis have been in the receiving end of ethnic violence (for instance, Nellie massacre 1983, Kokrajhar-Sonitpur killings of 2014). In the context of xenophobia, migration flows lead to spatial reorganization triggering ethnic animosities. Fears such as these have led to reinvigorated demands of Inner Line Permit (ILP) in Meghalaya and Manipur. Paradoxically, the region has also seen a surge in the outmigration of labourers over the last decade, given the redundant traditional livelihood opportunities and lack of job-generating industries in the region. In this regard, *Look and Act East* policy seemingly holds a double edged sword, wherein it would presumably generate labour employment, while restructured labour market would facilitate migration which might provoke the fragile peace situation in the northeast region. Apart from ethnic divides, the region has also woken up to class conflicts in urban cities like Guwahati, where the settlements of the subaltern class on the hills of the city has led to intermittent conflicts between the settlers and the state authorities on the ground of ownership. Guwahati has seen a rapid appropriation of the urban spaces by the real estate and leisure industry with investments proliferating especially in the last few years. Peasant mobilizations and popular movements have sprung up against the marginalization of the subaltern class led by organization like KrishakMuktiSangramSamiti (KMSS) which also challenges the existing paradigm of resource extraction from the region. Migration also includes a surge in trafficking in labour, sex, human organs, weaponry, etc., once again suggesting a different kind of connectivity – the other site of official globalization today. If *Look East and Act East* betoken globalization in this region dismantling old borders, cordons, fences, and remaking the frontier, its neoliberal nature means development of a particular type with specific consequences for the people of the region.

C. Research Questions

6. We propose to pursue the following research questions in this paper:
 - (a) Mapping the extraction and infrastructural activities in the region in the last fifteen-twenty years;
 - (b) On the basis of such mapping, examining the relation between *Look and Act East policies* of the Indian state and the specific developmental policies in this region;
 - (c) Examining the relations between trade, neo-liberalism, greater connectivity, and India's *Look and Act East* policies;
 - (d) Examining the relation between the various components of *Look and Act East* policy;
 - (e) Finally, 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. What is the nature of social governance required for the *Look and Act East*?
7. It will be an 8000-10,000 word paper with maps.