

REPORT ON RESEARCH WORKHOP

On

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

Calcutta Research Group in collaboration with the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung and Department of South and South East Asian Studies, University of Kolkata

Kolkata 16 November 2016

Venue – The Sojourn, Salt Lake, Kolkata.

11.15-11.45 am : An Introduction to CRG RLS Project on *A Social Mapping of Infrastructure, Logistics and India's Look East Policy* by

Anita Sengupta

Snehasish Mitra

Sucharita Sengupta

Iman Mitra

11.45 am – 1.15 pm: Panel Discussion on *Infrastructure and Logistics in Northeast India*

Chair and Moderator: Rajagopal Dhar Chakraborty (Department of South and Southeast Asian Studies University of Calcutta)

Pradip Phanjourn (Editor, Imphal Free Press) on *Security, Commerce and Northeast Infrastructure Development*

Monirul Hussain (Department of Political Science, Gauhati University) on *Interrogating Infrastructure in Northeast India: Implications on the Politics of the Region*

Vijaylaxmi Brara (Centre for Manipur Studies, Manipur University) on *Gender Dimension in the New Form of Governance in Northeast India*

Rajagopal Dhar Chakraborty who chaired the panel discussion began by noting that Northeast India has been ignored since the colonial era. And the post colonial period has continued with the regime of extraction. But now due to Look East Policy and China's influence, the region is attracted the attention of the Indian policy regime. This has majorly impinged on infrastructural activities. The focus is now on connectivity. This calls for new research on the Northeast region.

Pradip Phanjourn presented issues of northeast India through colonial history and the current situation. He argued that in his book on the 'Northeast Question' there are several chapters on the historical context of the emergence of what is known as Northeast India today where he has responded to Neville Maxwell's claim that Arunachal Pradesh should be in China. He went on to argue that the

interest on Northeast is either for commerce or military activities, with no focus on the local people. 1826 was an important year for Northeast India as the year when the British defeated the Burmese. In the three Burmese wars the British annexed the whole of Burma. Assam was now kept as a buffer zone after the military threat was eliminated. The interest resurfaced after tea was discovered in Assam. Civil militia was raised to provide cost-effective security to British investments. In 1970 this became the Assam Rifles. The incentive to perform well was that good performance would be rewarded with transfer to the military. The Gorkha military regiment found their nursery in the militia regime of the region. The first 5 battalions of Assam Rifles were Gorkha regiments. Today there are 43 battalions of Assam Rifles. Development in the Northeast is very much tied to security. A charter of NEC stated that any development in Northeast needs to be approved by the military.

Ashok Mitra had written that when Burma was separated, no one protested, even during the height of the national movement. If on the other hand the northeast was separated it would have created a different situation. Curzon in 1907 gave a speech about the ideas of border. The ideas of border are very European. Curzon stated that in 1907 that the buffers around the colonies were due to the other European state's proximity. The empire's interest had a conflict with that of British India. Bhutan was a major bone of contention and in 1865 a treaty was signed which is similar to the *posha* system which were earlier practiced by the Ahoms, wherein the Bhutias were allowed to tax the Dooars.

Monirul Hussain continued the discussion by arguing that the map making of northeast is continuous, it has continued since the British times and has been a source of conflict. The border of northeast India was always fluid where people came in from different regions. Also Assam was not a part of the Indian empire in the historical context which resulted in different mixtures of ethnicity in the region. Once borders were demarcated during the British era, the flow of people from different directions also came to a stop. The integration of the region to India has always been contentious. Now that India looks forward to be a global power, northeast is supposed to play a part through Look East Policy. This has several implications for the region. It is important to recall that besides Bengal and Punjab, Assam was also partitioned during 1947.

It is important to emphasize that the infrastructure in the region is still not developed. There have been some improvements, but not enough. The aspirations of Look East Policy is yet to materialize. The partition took away a substantial transport network in the region. It is still a difficult task to connect to Southeast Asia through the Northeast. The proposition of connecting the capitals is yet to see daylight. It is very difficult to visit regions like Mizoram. We have to go via Calcutta. Now Agartala and Arunachal are in now railway map. However, roads in Arunachal gets shutdown due to landslides leading to uncertainties in the journey. The ILP is also an impediment to communication in the region. These are also negating factors in business and trade. The project completion rate is very poor in the region. The east west corridor is also a farfetched dream. The political unrest, particularly in Bodoland becomes very important in the discussion since the issues of the Bodo people are yet to be solved. There needs to be more

emphasis on infrastructure building. One may recall that as far back as the 1940's Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose had managed to enter enter Myanmar through the north east. However, even today there is no direct connectivity to Myanmar after 70 years of independence.

Vijaylakshmi Brara: She began with the argument that women in Manipur are not really the *subthemes* in its history but have occupied a prominent place in the history of struggle against the British, not once but twice, called the *nupilans* of 1904 and 1939. At the same time mention have been made of various queens who were warriors in their own right. There are things one can locate, such as their institutions and their spaces which remain in an informal sphere from *immemorials* to the present. In fact it can be stated informality is associated with women and the space of formal economy is mainly handled by the men. Women have been doing well in Manipur on several aspects; they have logistics to deal with economic burdens in the form of *marups*, they have collectives in economic sphere extending to emotional and physical in the form of *ima keithels*, the sacred complexities were resolved by the institution of *Maibies* and political exigencies in the form of *Meira Pabis*, as well as chiefs in the hills (surprisingly and formal!). Lastly the *khutlangs* or the 'women farmer helping hands' are keeping the produce of paddy in a self sustaining mode. These have been the indigenous source of sustenance since time immemorial. In fact *Jhum*, which has been the major source of food security is being labeled as anti environment and the male farmers are being encouraged to bring in cash crops leading to impoverishment of the families. One has to see whether any of these institutions have ever been mentioned in the policy initiatives of the modern governance. Why not? Why don't we have modern institutions metamorphosed and transformed from these traditional intuitions? Non recognition of indigeneity is leading to impoverishment and a move towards marginalisation of the women folk and the society at large. Women have been known to be the repository of indigenous knowledge systems. One can go through the literature on the mother's wisdom of native American tribes, what we call the Iroquois nations, or Filipino women's understanding of the importance of river sources. Back home a Kuki woman cited a bird to indicate the arrival of rain. The knowledge of rich herbal medicines by the elderly women in this part of region is just waiting to be explored. But where is their place in formulating developmental plans? One needs to focus on human development and not just about bringing in mega structures. And there are alternatives available.

Question and Answer

Question: All three panelists have referred to history, when we talk of northeast india's connectivity to outside India, we are still carrying a colonial hangover. How can we overcome it?

Phanjoubham: About 2 billion dollar trade is done between India and Myanmar, but hardly through the northeast. Trade in the northeast is mainly informal. Look East Policy needs to be more pragmatic, by linking backward regions with global capital. Connectivity and trade also creates bondage. Upper Burma and Laos can be bought within the ambit of Look East for making it more viable for northeast.

This will also eradicate several problems like smuggling, illegal trade etc. One also has to keep in mind the fact that China's investment has been crucial in North Thailand which has made the Mekong river perennial. Kunming has become an important centre through these new ties and networks. India can look forward to similar transitions for borderland Northeast India.

Vijaylakhsmi: The problem is that the NE is viewed through the lens of security, which is a problem since it also means that the NE doesn't have its own development plan. Most plans on the northeast is also centralized. The trade proposals, if they don't come from within the region serve as a bridge. The regime of parasitic development has gone on for too long. Immersed in ethnic determinism politics makes it extremely difficult to break the nexus of dysfunctional society and sustainable livelihoods for the people.

Question. Given these realities, what is the point of departure between colonial state and the Indian government, or has it tended towards identification?

Phanjoubham: The whole attitude of Indian state is Western oriented, the region is repeatedly ignored from a policy perspective. But because of Kashmir taking away most of the attention towards the AFSPA, the specificities of northeast is lost somewhere. The space management in Assam has been interesting, the nonrevenue places gave rise to ILP. It has continued today as well. The tax consideration was important in such policy manoeuvres.

Question: In recent years outmigration has seen a surge from the northeast region, what implications does it hold for the region?

Monirul: Migration has been a major bone of contention since the colonial period. Over times we have seen how the Bengali Muslims and Nepalis have been targeted in several places of the region. The outmigration is a paradoxical reaction actually given the region has always attracted migrants from outside. It can be attributed to the access of knowledge about the job market in Kolkata, Delhi, Bangalore etc., through the improved communications and telecommunications. The conflict scenario has been a deterrent in creating new economic opportunities. Recent figures have shown that remittances from outside the region have been a major contributor to the local economy. What remains to be seen is whether outmigration will succeed in changing the political questions of the region in the coming days.

2 pm - 3 pm:

Workshop Lecture by **Lipi Ghosh** (Department of South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Calcutta) on *India-South East Asia Relations in context of North East Asia & Bay of Bengal: Pre-colonial Connectivity and Contemporary Convergence*

Chair: Pradip Phanjoum (Editor, Imphal Free Press)

Inter-Asian linkages and connectivity are important subjects for modern day research. While we talk of India- South East Asia connectivity, we take into consideration two dimensions, i.e. land and maritime connectivities. The presentation examined India- South East Asia land and maritime connectivities in pre-colonial historical past taking in purview their contemporary utilities. Relations between India and the western parts of Southeast Asia go back to

ancient times. India's cultural influence on Burma, Siam, Malaya, Cambodia and Java is quite evident. Both the land and the sea were the obvious ways to travel between India and the Southeast Asian archipelago and social and religious contacts have also thrived because of these land and sea borne trading links.

In this India South East Asia land linkages, North East India's route linkages with Myanmar and Thailand are significant factors. Northeast India stands as the bridge of connectivity between India, Myanmar & Thailand. In the annals of Indian foreign policy, Northeast India has always remained a strategic linking point and used to be referred to as the frontier between India and its neighbours. Ethnically, this region is distinct from the rest of India and has strong ethnic and cultural ties with Southeast Asia. As a region, the northeast is demarcated by India's international boundaries with China, Myanmar (formerly Burma), Bhutan and Bangladesh, and internally by the boundary between Assam and a very narrow strip of northern West Bengal known as the "chicken's neck." During the British rule in India, this region acted an eastern buffer zone for India between Burma and China. During the Cold War years, New Delhi's lack of any definite East Asia policy made this region totally isolated in its economic and foreign policy domain. This situation has been drastically altered in the context of New Global Order, following India's proclamation of its Look East policy. Presently, this region can be considered as a 'Gateway to Southeast Asia', on account of its geo-strategic and economic importance. My presentation talks on the projects of roadway and railway linkages between Northeast India and South East Asia. That being the issue of land linkages, it appears from the writings of historians that in the pre-colonial era Myanmar and Thailand maintained a significant range of trade in their western edge of the Bay of Bengal which was eventually linked to the Indian Ocean. It is argued in recent researches that India's maritime contact with Southeast Asia can be dated as far back the 4th century B.C. It was these trade networks which not only marked trade and exchanges but also characterized the trajectory of the culture of the region.

The presentation referred to pre-colonial and colonial literature and identified the trade route between the IO/ Bay of Bengal littorals. In contemporary context, the Bay of Bengal still plays a major role. Kaladan Multimodal Transport Project signed between India and Myanmar is an important parametre of discussion. The project involves a major up gradation of infrastructure at Sittwe, located about 250km from the Mizoram border on the north-western coast of Myanmar where the Kaladan river joins the Bay of Bengal .

4 pm – 5.00 pm

Public Lecture lecture by **Nimmi Kurian**, Associate Professor, Centre for Policy Research on *The Periphery as Hub? Competing Constructions of Borders in India's Act East Policy*.

Chair: Vijaylaxmi Brara (Centre for Manipur Studies, Manipur University) on *Gender Dimension in the New Form of Governance in Northeast India*

The subregional turn in Indian diplomacy marks an interesting discursive shift in Indian foreign policy and its engagement of the Asian neighbourhood. The idea of subregionalism has gained increasing recognition in discourses of development and offers new insights to mainstream theories of regionalism. While regional trading blocs and arrangements have been a common phenomenon, subregional cooperation represents a novel extension of this larger idea, in that geographically proximate subregions within two or more countries become sites of transborder cooperation. What this does is to bring attention to the borderlands both as a missing level of analysis and as a level of governance. The idea of projecting Northeast India as a gateway to the wider dynamic Asian neighbourhood has found an increasing measure of rhetorical importance under India's Look East policy and the rechristened Act East policy. Through a host of sub-regional initiatives like the BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Multi-Sectoral Initiative for Technical and Economic Cooperation), the Mekong Ganga Economic Cooperation (MGC), and the Bangladesh-China-India- Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM EC) India has attempted to signal the growing priority it attaches to integrating its eastern region with the wider Asian neighbourhood.

India's subregional diplomacy is clearly producing a modest but valuable space for subnational actors to become active partners in framing and fashioning the terms of India's subregional engagement. These have the potential to recognise the local stakeholder as a critical actor on a range of shared transborder issues such as trade, energy, environment, land use and transport. Retrieving the notion of subregionalism as process can help locate Indian IR within a larger historical template of social, economic and cultural flows that constitute the lived experiences of border communities. It is these 'connected histories' that have to be at the centre of any new rethinking on borderlands. It is time to turn the page back and recall these 'histories of Asian cosmopolitanism' to remind ourselves that the contemporary notion of Northeast India as a landlocked region has little or no historical credence