

24<sup>th</sup> August 2017, 11:00 to 1 pm

Panel 3: **The Urban Question and the North-East**

(**Discussant:** Bharat Bhushan, **Chair:** Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury)

## **Urbanisation by the Border: Refreshing the frontier space in Northeast India**

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### **Background**

The processes of East Asian urbanization are unique because they have been deeply influenced by state led strategies of national development, which are deeply interwoven with post Cold War geopolitical economics of capitalist development. In this context India's 'Look and Act East Policy' was a strategic response after the fall of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), which envisages bridging the spaces with other Southeast Asian nations through Northeast India which has become a repository of transitory and geopolitical agendas. This holds several underpinnings for the spaces within the region as well. The resources of the region are being increasingly mapped, allotted and extracted, while infrastructural expansion are taking place through railway, roads and airways. In collateral sequence cities such as Guwahati, Agartala, Dimapur and border towns like Moreh, Champai and Dawki, gain new status as nodes of connectivity and transit points for labour, capital and resources. In other words the cities and towns serve the purpose of representing governable 'spaces' within a troubled periphery which creates an image of normalized, rather normative space in a neo-liberal time period. March of the new forces of capital under the template of logistical expansion however encounters resistance in Northeast India as sovereignty of India remains unreconciled by multiple communities in the region.

### **Northeast India and Frontier Urbanism**

Over the last few years Northeast India has witnessed an emphasis on developing the infrastructure through widening roads, expanding air connectivity, extending railway networks, opening new and reactivating old dormant trade routes, and facilitating border trade and transit points. The infrastructural and logistical expansion has therefore infused a new lease of life into the towns and cities of the region, which were mostly serving as administrative centres. In 2015, 7 cities from the region, namely- Guwahati, Imphal, Agartala, Pasighat, Aizwal, Kohima and Shillong were among the 'smart city' nominees. Moreh in Manipur, situated on the Indo-Myanmar border was declared a 'Free Trade Zone' by the Government of India in 1995 and is now a township. Manipur government has taken the initiative to build a market complex in Moreh with a budget of Rs. 22 crores. The number of items to be traded between India and Myanmar has increased from 40 to 62 in November 2012. A report titled "Emerging North East India" published by FICCI proposes similar approaches in Dawki, Karimganj, Akhaura, Mankachar, and few other towns along with similar initiatives on the other side of the border in Bangladesh. Likewise, the Land Custom Station (LCS) in Akhaura near Agartala town is functional now with the facilities of passenger terminal, warehouse, and entry gate. The Agartala-Kolkata bus service through Dhaka in Bangladesh has started operating from Akhaura.

Urban and trading centres of the region in a way exhibit the expanding niche of capital in the frontier; however it doesn't discount the multiple fault lines in the region which inhibits the linear aggression of capital. Nagaland is witnessing a serious debate with regards to holding of the Urban Local Body (ULB) polls. Multiple Naga organizations have questioned the legality to hold such elections under the provision of Article 371(A), while simultaneously attesting similar logic against the 33% reservation of women representatives in the ULBs. Guwahati, the biggest city of Northeast India has seen a rapid proliferation of urban space appropriation through real estate and hospitality sector. The hills of the city, excepting a couple, are still resisting the gentrified urban expansion due to the unyielding ownership claims of subaltern settlements. For any study of the political economy of the region it would be crucial to see that how the expanding role of Moreh in the coming years through greater connectivity and investments would influence the contesting claims of different groups over Moreh's trade and logistics. Also the greater connectivity will surge the bargaining power of the ethno-nationalist with contesting notions of sovereignty, with the local and Indian state. Pregnant with 'durable disorders', Northeast represents a volatile space wherein the Lefebvrian suggestion of understating space could be useful – "Method for approaching spatial problems cannot consist of one formal method, logical or logistical, it must be a dialectical method that analyzes the contradictions in society and social practice".

### **Research Agendas and Questions**

Until now, Northeast India has seen academic enquiry mainly confined to separatist insurgency, identity politics and anthropology of tribal communities. Migration and urbanization provides insights into the profound changes taking place in Northeast India. Recent trend of academic literatures emanating from the region attempts to locate those changes; for example Duncan Mc DuieRa's work on Imphal (capital of Manipur state) highlights how the urban spaces of the Northeast frontier is reacting in terms of capital flows, conflict economy and migration. Atig Ghosh's work on Siliguri as the border city of North Bengal, though not technically situated in Northeast India, also shows that the urban transformation in Siliguri is major influenced by the changing nature of capital and emerging prospects of connectivity. Recent literatures on ethnography of infrastructures (Larkin 2013) suggest that infrastructures serve purposes which go beyond their materiality. Examples from Congo, Soviet Union and Indonesia reveal that people tend to have an affectual relation with infrastructure, which are often built with symbolic agendas in order to ensure allegiance towards the sponsoring state. Employing a similar approach through ethnography in Northeast India may offer a new way of looking at the recent and proposed infrastructural expansion.

Bringing the urban question in Northeast India with focus on the migrants will help to consolidate the understanding of urban justice in a frontier space, by accounting the segmentation and linkages in formation of the city and therefore elaborating the different fault lines (economic groups, caste, race, gender, religion, etc.) along which the city develops as a site of power, contestations, and claim makings. The Indian state in recent years have shifted from security centric to trade centric governance, by employing what Ranabir Samaddar argues as emerging 'social governance'- an assemblage of governing techniques towards reducing and managing social tensions. Interrogating

the social governance further will give an idea about how the contestation in the region will be managed, avoided or suppressed. Significantly the field sites across the Indo-Myanmar border would offer the narratives of vernacular urbanism in Asia where opening of internal and external borders is transforming the land 'in between' sovereign spaces.

We propose to pursue the following research questions in this paper:

1. Mapping the changes that have taken place in the cities and towns (two to three fieldsites – Moreh, Dimapur, Agartala in Northeast India, Tamu and Pangsau in Myanmar) in the last few years with regards to logistics and infrastructure;
2. On the basis of such mapping, examining the extent to which the cities/towns have facilitated cross border trade and the various impediments encountered in the process;
3. Examining how the spatial intervention of the state through formal infrastructure and information networks, influences the politics of the region, specifically to what extent it transforms the question of sovereignty into question of governance.

Understanding the changing of roles actors and subjects in the region, such as women, security forces, local governing institutions (autonomous councils, urban bodies, development authorities) and business enterprises

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