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Logistical Spaces - III

Hubs, Connectivity and Transit

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Hubs, Connectivity and Transit

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Bangladesh: The Key to India's
Look East through Northeast

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India's Look East policy, now upgraded as 'Act East' by Prime Minister Narendra Modi , calls for a double look East. To make it successful and achieve its purpose of situating the country's under-developed and conflict ridden 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 holds the key to India's overland connection to its Northeast, which is linked by land through a tenuous 21-lms wide Siliguri corridor, often derided as a "Chicken's Neck". The access to sea for India's Northeast is also easily possible through Bangladesh and somewhat more circuitously through Myanmar. So it would be no exaggeration to say that Bangladesh holds the key to India's 'Look East' or 'Act East' policy when Delhi seeks to use the country's Northeast as a bridgehead in the way China seeks to use frontier provinces like Yunnan .

Initially, the 'Northeast' did not figure in India's Look East policy when it was first conceived in the 1990s. Myanmar was still a closed country and not a member of ASEAN at that time. So, India's Look East, that essentially sought to develop higher trade and closer connectivity with the 'Tiger economies' of ASEAN, focused on the maritime route, on sea routes between India's Eastern coast and South-East Asia. But for a combination of security and economic reasons, India is now seeking better overland physical connectivity to South-East Asia through the country's Northeast. The underlying theme of this engagement is to situate the Northeast at the heart of India's Look East policy and use it to develop the backward region, much like China has developed Yunnan and other frontier provinces as part of its overland engagement with neighboring countries. The Indian foreign secretary S. Jaishanker made this clear during a keynote address at the East-West Centre's Conference in Delhi : "There is also a broad recognition that physical connectivity to the East offers game-changing possibilities not only for our relationship with the ASEAN, but also to the economic future of India's North-Eastern and Eastern states." [1] The idea is to open up markets in East and South-East Asia and get Indian industry to set up manufacturing in the Northeast, specially for products for which raw materials are locally available. This is seen as the best option to develop the Northeast. Looking back at the colonial period when Northeast, specially Assam, thrived through cross-regional trade, specially the China trade, helps in offering contemporary solutions to the

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Northeast's problems of under-development, which , in turn, is seen as resolving the region's long drawn separatist insurgencies that have thrived on alienation caused by lack of development.

Though the maritime routes offer easier transportation (in terms of costs and time) to coastal South East Asia, connecting to untapped markets of South-West and Western China and highland regions of South-East Asia would be much easier through North East. China's seaports are in the country's Eastern sea board, accessible through the Malacca Straits and goods shipped there have to be brought back overland to Western and South-Western China. It would mean half the distance and much less cost to ship goods overland through India's Northeast. With China emerging as India's leading trade partner and India keen to export more to China to offset the existing adverse balance of trade, using the land bridge opportunity that India's Northeast provides is now seen as important.   No wonder, foreign secretary Jaishanker has stressed the need to "continuously nurturing of relations" to fully realise the vision for improvement of Sino-Indian bilateral ties agreed upon by Chinese and Indian leaders in 2014-15." [2]   It is in this changing context of domestic and diplomatic priorities that India's Northeast has emerged as a key, if not a central theme, in the country's Look East Policy. And that has increased the importance of Bangladesh in the entire 'Look East' policy matrix for India.

Boosted by the return of a friendly regime in Dhaka under the leadership of current Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, India undertook a quantam leap in bilateral relationship with Bangladesh in 2010. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Dhaka with several chief ministers of Indian states bordering Bangladesh. Though West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee did a last minute pullout protesting against an impending agreement on the sharing of the waters of Teesta river, the India-Bangladesh bilateral relations has only gone forward ever since. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has only carried forward the process by developing rail-road-river-cyber connectivity between India and Bangladesh and used it to strengthen such links between the mainland and the Northeast through Bangladesh. Dhaka's decision to allow transit of goods through its territory to the Northeast from Indian mainland was a game changer. It may take a while to operationalize and stabilize but there is no going back. It is clear that only 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 will work. India's 'Look East' will not work through the Chicken Neck but through Bangladesh. India is therefore prioritizing linking up to North East through Bangladesh avoiding the 'Siliguri corridor' much as China is seeking to avoid the Malacca straits (that its strategist see as a chokepoint) and trying to develop multiple land-to-sea access into Myanmar and Pakistan.

This paper seeks to address seven issues:
- (a) Why and how is connectivity through Bangladesh key to success of India's Look East?
- (b) The possible pitfalls in India-Bangladesh bilateral relations that can threaten the forward movement towards Look East
- (c) The present state of India-Bangladesh relations and the progress in connectivity
- (d) The crucial role of states in promoting this bilateral relations – the key role of Tripura in promoting this relationship and the gains made by it against other states who are yet to warm up to Bangladesh
- (e) Finally, it would be great to explore the linkages between security and connectivity in India-Bangladesh relations and its impact on India's Look East policy
- (f) The quid pro quo factor – 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 North East through Bangladesh

(g) How can initiatives like ' border *haats*' 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

It will also explore how the India-Bangladesh relationship that is crucial for Delhi's Look East policy can also become central to an alternate vision of a South Asian federation minus Pakistan. That will have a bearing on the changing geopolitics of Asia that would insulate the rest of South Asia from Pakistan and the terror fulcrum of the AF-Pak region that is closer to Central Asia and Middle East in historical and contemporary terms.

The India-Bangladesh relationship is also crucial to undermining the Two Nation theory that led to the partition of the sub-continent and continues to bedevil relations in South Asia. If a Muslim predominant Bangladesh and a Hindu predominant India can flourish through a mutually beneficial bilateral relationship, it negates the opinion of those who advocate the inevitability of conflict between the successor states of British India. The success of the Look East is key for India's future. Not only is the East and Northeast the Achilles Heel of India due to its sustained under-development and susceptibility to different layers of conflict, but this is also the area where Indian diplomacy has the necessary space to play out a new script of connectivity, culture and commerce that is denied to it in the West by an ever-hostile Pakistan . In fact, if India and Bangladesh succeed in carrying their relationship to new heights, it will help dispel fears of 'Big Brother India' among its smaller neighbours. An isolated Pakistan may thus feel incentivized to change track and attempt improving relations with India to avoid isolation.

The study will closely focus on (a) connectivity plans (b) integration of economies and infrastructure (c) security (d) regional cooperation in India-Bangladesh bilateral relations and also focus on how the two countries are trying to turn the 'Chicken Neck' into an asset rather than a liability by the recent opening of the Banglabandha-Phulbari checkpost that will help Bangladesh access the Siliguri Corridor to link up to Nepal, Bhutan and Upper Northeast India. Finally it will explore the potential of this relationship to the wider process of regional integration efforts in the region through groupings like BCIM and BIMSTEC, both of which have been prioritized by Bangladesh and may soon be done so by India in view of growing realization that the fruits of regional cooperation will accrue only if China is part of the process and not kept out of it. India and China need to harmonize their 'Look East' and 'One Belt One Road' (OBOR) to avoid competition and conflict in South-East Asia. Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang has said his government does not see 'any contradiction' between the two[3]. But the Modi government remains uncertain in its response, much to the chagrin of Bangladesh, which is keen to ensure there is no conflict of interest between the two Asian giants because it sees a huge spin off from both India's Look-East and China's OBOR. Bangladesh Industry Minister Amir Hussain Amu stressed the importance of BCIM in no uncertain terms in a recent seminar of regional connectivity in Northeast India. " The proposed economic corridor of BCIM has huge prospects for trade, investment, energy, transport and tourism," Amu said., emphasizing that the four countries -Bangladesh, China, India , Myanmar -- account for 9 percent of the world's land area, 7.3 percent of the global GDP and 440 million people (a huge market)[4].

The 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War: Why India Intervened!

It may not be out of place to look back at India's decisive support for the Bangladesh liberation cause and its 1971 military intervention to achieve the ultimate objective of independence for

Bengalis. This single most important and successful Indian foreign policy initiative with obvious military overtones not only broke up Pakistan but also created a friendly Bengali state in India's East. What motivated Delhi's decisive intervention also motivates India's Bangladesh policy now. Tripura's first chief minister Sachindralal Singha articulated India's concerns – and that of states in India's Northeast – most emphatically when he told the-then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi that India needed to 'kick Pakistan out of the East' . He argued that so long Pakistan remained in the East, it would encourage anti-Indian insurgents in the Northeast and seek to destabilize the remote region – so it was incumbent, he argued, on the Indian government to back the Bengali autonomist movement that was fast turning separatist due to Pakistani military oppression. But Singha also emphasized that India could successfully connect to its Northeast only if there was a 'friendly Bengali state' (an expression he used in his conversations with Mrs Gandhi to pitch for Indian intervention to create an independent Bangladesh) [5]. He is the first Indian leader who articulated India's security and connectivity concerns between the country's mainland and its far flung Northeastern states that are mutually connected with a tenuous 21-kms Siliguri Corridor (often called Chicken Neck).

Mrs Indira Gandhi , desperate to tackle the spiraling insurgencies in India's Northeast in the late 1960s, bought Singha's argument and India started backing the Bengali freedom fighters when they took shelter in Indian border states in large numbers in 1971 . That happened after Pakistan's military junta headed by General Yayha Khan cut off negotiations with Awami League supremo Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and initiated a brutal military crackdown on 25th March 1971. For eight months, India armed and trained thousands of Bengali guerrillas and allowed its territory to be used for launching attacks on Pakistani targets in its Eastern province. Finally, Indian troops and border guards in civil dress, infiltrated into East Pakistan with Bengali irregulars to set the stage for an final military push that came after formal declaration of war between India and Pakistan on Dec 3 , 1971[6].

India achieved in East Pakistan what Pakistan had failed to achieve in Kashmir in 1947-48 and again in 1965. But before Bangladesh could recover from the ravages of the war and a subsequent famine a military coup not only led to the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and most of his family but also put in place successive military regimes unfriendly to India. India hit back by sponsoring the tribal uprising in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of South Eastern Bangladesh, while the military rulers of Bangladesh retaliated by a number of insurgent groups in India's Northeast[7]. Not only were India's security considerations in Northeast undermined but India also failed to make any progress trying to use Bangladesh territory to connect to its own Northeast. The twin objectives behind India's decisive military intervention in 1971 seemed to go waste. That changed after Mujibur Rahman's daughter Sheikh Hasina led Awami League to a decisive victory in the December 2008 parliament elections. In the last nearly eight years that Hasina has been in power, India and Bangladesh have agreed and implemented many connectivity proposals to link Indian mainland to its Northeast. That will discussed later in the paper but suffice it to say, India has two major concerns with its Northeast – security and connectivity. And Bangladesh is crucial to both.

Connecting to the Northeast through Bangladesh

Cyril Radcliffe not only created two post-colonial South Asian states through his weird cartography but he also created a new geographical region – India's Northeast. Prior to Partition, areas of what is now dubbed as India's "Northeast" were linked to some district of Eastern Bengal and its linkages to Indian mainland lay through it . So Tripura connected to India through Comilla, Assam and what is now Meghalaya (was then in Assam) connected to India through Sylhet, which was once part of Assam. Mizoram (then Mizo hills of Assam) connected to Indian mainland through Chittagong and

its hill tracts. The marking out of East Pakistan cut off Assam (then including much of what is today's India's Northeast) and the princely states of Tripura and Manipur from the rest of India, leaving it with a tenuous 21 kms land link through the Siliguri Corridor in North Bengal and western Assam.

Unlike China's Yunnan province which, though remote, is firmly connected to the country's mainland, India's Northeast cannot be properly accessed from the country's mainland without Bangladesh agreeing to facilitate the process by enabling transit and connectivity. A recent example will help emphasize the need for up gradation of these highways and rail networks in India's Northeast and also that Bangladesh is crucial for India to connect its mainland to the Northeast. For nearly five years, the 700MW project at Palatana in the Northeast Indian state of Tripura could not be completed as heavy equipment like transformers needed for this project could not be brought in through the national highways (NH 31 that connects Northeast to rest of India and NH 44 that connects Tripura to Assam) because more than 20 bridges on these highways were considered too weak and unsafe to transport such heavy equipment.

After the Awami League government came to power in Bangladesh in January 2009, both the Indian government and the state government of Tripura started negotiations for use of the Chittagong port to bring in the heavy equipment for the Palatana project. Bangladesh finally permitted the use of the Chittagong port and the river port of Asuganj for bringing in the heavy equipment needed for Palatana, strictly on a one-off basis. The equipment was shipped to Chittagong and then brought up to Asuganj by the river. Later it was moved into Tripura from Asuganj by land over a distance of only 40 kilometres. The project has now been commissioned and the Tripura government has offered 100MW of electricity to Bangladesh which is suffering from a huge power shortfall at the moment. India has agreed to Tripura's proposal and 100MW of electricity is reaching Bangladesh from Palatana[8]. The efforts to upgrade the highways and convert the railway network in many parts of Northeast to broad gauge have fallen much behind schedule after the usual delays in undertaking the projects. Apart from the problem of supply of materials, much of which has to be procured from outside the region, extortion and threats by armed non-state actors have caused these delays.

The centrality of Bangladesh to India's effort to 'Look East' through its own Northeast was emphasized by the 2013 BCIM (Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar) car rally which was flagged off at Calcutta on February 22 and ended at Kunming in early March. The 20 participating teams of about 80 people, entered Bangladesh at Petrapole-Benapole crossing and passed through Jessore, Dhaka and Sylhet, before entering India's Northeast on the way to Myanmar and China. Though the Bangladesh leg of the rally was less than that in Myanmar, the unmistakable importance of Bangladesh in linking South East Asia or South-West China to the Indian mainland was not lost. The distance differential between Calcutta and the Northeast Indian state capitals will help highlight the importance of getting to use Bangladesh for transit from the Indian mainland into Northeast India.

Table 1: Distance Differential between Northeastern Towns/ State Capitals and Calcutta via Chicken's Neck (Siliguri corridor) vis-à-vis through Bangladesh

From	To	Via Chicken's Neck	Through Bangladesh	Distance Differential
Agartala	Kolkata	1680 kms	450 kms	1230 kms
Silchar	Kolkata	1407 kms	600 kms	807 kms
Guwahati	Kolkata	1081 kms	830 kms	261 kms
Shillong	Kolkata	1181 kms	720 kms	461 kms
Imphal	Kolkata	1742 kms	900 kms	842 kms
Aizawl	Kolkata	1657 kms	800 kms	857 kms

(Source: Gurudas Das, Security and Development in India's Northeast, OUP, 2012: 138)

Specially for states in the lower part of India's Northeast, transit through Bangladesh is the only viable way for easy movement of goods and people. Not only will it sharply bring down transport costs, but transit through Bangladesh will also save much time for movement of goods and people to Indian mainland. From Agartala by train to Calcutta will still take at least 3 days but by bus through Bangladesh, the journey is between 16 to 18 hours even after calculating border immigration and customs twice over (while entering Bangladesh and then while re-entering Indian territory) .

Post-2008 Developments: Improving India-Bangladesh Connectivity

After Sheikh Hasina led the Awami League to power with a huge majority in Dec 2008 parliament elections, both Delhi and Dhaka have taken major steps towards improving connectivity between the two countries. In the long run, these measures will help India pursue its Look East or Act East policy more successfully because these steps will help better connectivity between the Indian mainland and the Northeast. Connecting to South-East Asia or East Asia through Northeast requires better connectivity between the Indian mainland and the Northeast and that is only possible if Bangladesh agrees. Much as India seeks to connect to its Northeast through Bangladesh, Bangladesh seeks to connect to the Himalayan countries of Nepal and Bhutan through Indian territory to access key resources like hydel power and markets for its products and labour. So there is clearly a quid pro quo involved.

Connectivity through Waterways: An agreement on coastal Shipping was signed on 6th June 2015 during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Dhaka. In November 2015, the Standard Operating Procedure for an Agreement on Coastal Shipping was finalized between the representatives of two governments. The Agreement facilitates use of bilateral waterways in keeping with the laws of either country. The agreement allows for use of eight waterway routes with the scope of further additions as and when deemed necessary or feasible by both governments. The Standard Operating Procedure details rules of conservancy and pilotage, enables necessary handling facilities, supply of bunkers, purchase of stores and provisions during voyage, repairing facilities, customs checks, freight remittance, transport and transhipment cargo, settlement of disputes, and others. Twice a year, or more if necessary, Joint Shipping Committees are scheduled to meet and discuss matters relevant to the Agreement.

Only River Sea Vessels (RSV) 22 of Type-III & IV will be permitted for operation under the agreement. Before this agreement, commodities from India to Bangladesh and Bangladesh to India were first sent to Singapore and Colombo seaports because cargo shipments in big vessels were found to be non-viable between India and Bangladesh because such vessels could not ply between the sea ports of Bangladesh and India. So, via Colombo or Singapore, it took around 30-40 days to send back commodities to be finally loaded in smaller river sea vessels for transhipment to ports in India and Bangladesh. This sea route was long and cumbersome and increased transportation costs. So there was requirement for smaller vessels to connect to sea ports of India and Chittagong, Bangladesh[9].

This agreement has facilitated the regular plying of vessels. This will reduce cost and transportation time by nearly ten days. Competitive cargo rates will benefit traders and help improve infrastructure of sea ports, besides connecting to remote areas, among other benefits. Talks began in 2012 and concluded successfully in 2015 with the signing of the coastal shipping agreement. The move by the two governments is expected to reduce the cost of export-import or EXIM cargo and will also bring advantages for cargo slated to reach India's Northeast through inland waterways from the Chittagong port. The deep draft ports on India's East coast will serve as hub ports for goods reaching Bangladesh, thereby reducing the cost to Bangladesh while at the same time, it will help attract more cargo towards these Indian ports. The formal procedure laid down in the Agreement was launched at Chittagong port by Bangladesh Shipping Minister Shahjahan Khan on 16th March 2016. The coastal shipping was initiated, when the container vessel left Chittagong Port in Bangladesh on 23 March 2016 and arrived at Krishnapatnam Port in India on 28th March.

Tripura can reap huge benefits from the approval of the coastal agreement. With this agreement, the heavy equipment consignment for OTPC Palatana Power Project in Tripura will now ply via Ashugunj Port, Bangladesh which will be both time and cost effective. Further, the facilitation of transportation of rice stocks from Vishakhapatnam port to Tripura via Ashugunj Port, Bangladesh 24 is also favourable for Tripura. A Bangladeshi ship arriving from the Kolkata port and carrying 1,000 tonnes of corrugated iron sheets left Ashuganj port in Bangladesh for Tripura on 22 June 2016, as transit between India and Bangladesh became operational. The transit trade will make Tripura the gateway into India's Northeast, not only saving huge transport costs and time for the whole of India's Northeast, but also help avoid routes within Northeast which are susceptible to disruption either because of ethnic political agitations or because of landslides and natural calamites like floods.

Tripura's state government has also started efforts to make its rivers more navigable to take advantage of the transit regime. As and when the rivers Gomti and Haora are dredged and made navigable, Tripura can use its inland waterways to transport commodities through Bangladesh at a much cheaper cost. This will surely make Tripura the main entrepot of trade and transport between the Indian mainland and the rest of Northeast via Bangladesh. It will also provide the state access to sea via Bangladesh.

Transit: India has been requesting Bangladesh to consider transit of goods through its territory for reaching India's Northeast ever since 1972, when Bangladesh emerged as a free nation. But all such efforts failed to make headway both during the successive military rule of Ziaur Rahman and H M Ershad and also during subsequent democratic governments. Article V of the GATT 1994 provides for freedom of transit of goods, vessels, and other means of transport across the territory of WTO countries but Bangladesh transport expert M Rahmatullah pointed out that normally transit in GATT involves three countries and not two. So he advocated that the India-Bangladesh transit issue be addressed bilaterally[10]. But though experts pointed to a huge economic spin-off for Bangladesh if it

allowed transit between Indian mainland and its Northeastern region, successive regimes in Dhaka shelved the proposal, partly because they were uncertain of public reactions and partly because of lobbying by countries unfriendly to India. A 2008 study on South Asian transit arrangements observed "Unlike European Union, South Asia does not have regional transit arrangement, although partial transit exists for landlocked countries like Afghanistan, Bhutan and Nepal. The present squishy transit arrangement in South Asia is nonetheless disappointing."[11]

A rough estimate suggests that India would have saved around US$ 1.77 billion[3] while transporting goods through Bangladesh Corridor instead of Chicken's Neck and Bangladesh could have earned US$ 242.95 million as transit fee which would have covered about 22 per cent of Bangladesh's trade deficit with India. Some have argued that Bangladesh's strategic community was keen to deny India the advantage of transit to weaken Delhi's grip on the Northeast. Others have said that trade and business in Bangladesh looked at Northeast India as a captive market and giving India transit was seen as compromising that advantage.[12] But that changed after Hasina's Awami League came back to power for a second successive term winning the January 2014 parliament elections. The new government, grateful for India's uncompromising support in the face of a determined opposition bid to topple it , was backed by economists and business leaders in seeking the entire Indian market for its products rather than looking at the Northeast as a captive market. And using Indian territory to connect to the Himalayan countries of Bhutan and Nepal , for natural resources , specially power, was seen as important, for which it was felt necessary to offer a strong quid pro quo by accepting India's long standing request for transit. The strategic argument of denying India transit to keep its grip on Northeast weak got buried in the growing mutual dependence between Delhi and Dhaka on a wide range of issues.

Negotiations for finalizing the transit issue began in right earnest and it was decided that goods from Indian ports will reach Chittagong and up the Meghna river to Ashuganj. The goods will be unloaded at Ashuganj port and then reloaded onto Bangladeshi trucks before travelling onto the Agartala in Tripura via Akhaura. The entire duration of the transshipment will be 10 days. The transshipment fee has been fixed at Tk 192.25 per tonne and India has to pay an additional Tk 50 per tonne for transporting goods from the Ashuganj port to Akhaura. Also, India will pay Tk 10 per tonne for shipment of goods through two Bangladesh's canals (Mongla-Ghashiakhali and Gabkhan Canal) besides labour handling, pilotage and berthing charges.

Some say that the rates are not lucrative enough for Bangladesh, considering the pressure it will create on Bangladesh's transport system and the funds that Bangladesh would need to upgrade its transport infrastructure to take the additional burden of transit traffic. ESCAP's transport expert Rahmatullah had observed that "Bangladesh would need at least five to seven years to put its transport system in full gear to carry both national and anticipated transit traffic."[13] He had also recommended that pending completion of major railway and inland waterways projects, around ten percent of the transit traffic should be carried by road, on transshipment basis or considers using Joint Venture Trucking Company (JVTC) approach.

Though it is early days for the transit arrangement and much more detail needs to be worked out, it is a significant breakthrough for India in establishing connectivity between the Indian mainland and the country's Northeast. As India starts to make considerable savings in transportation cost to Northeast, it might well consider passing a part of the benefit to Bangladesh, either in raising the transit fees or indirectly by providing Bangladesh huge financial aid to upgrade its transport infrastructure, specially the routes to be used for transit traffic from India's mainland to the Northeast.

Connectivity by Rail and Road: During her first tenure in power, Sheikh Hasina's government had started the Dhaka-Kolkata and the Dhaka-Agartala bus service. After she came to power in 2009 and then again in 2014, her government decided to work out more bus routes like Dhaka-Shillong-Guwahati and Dhaka-Siliguri. But the decision to allow a new bus service on the KolkataDhaka-Agartala route is a quantam leap because it allows direct bus connectivity between the Indian mainland and the Northeast for the first time. It acknowledges a long-standing demand from the people of Tripura for a direct land route to Kolkata. Finally, the MoU on this bus service was signed during Modi's visit in 2015. It has been decided that there will be two buses on the Kolkata-Agartala-Dhaka route, one of which will be run by the West Bengal government and the other by the Tripura government. Both India and Bangladesh will operate thrice a week on a round-trip basis except on Sundays and will pass through the Benapole-Petrapole and Akhaura-Agartala checkposts. The starting point from Kolkata will be Karunamoyee Central Bus Terminus, it will halt at BRTC International Bus Terminal, Kamalapur, Dhaka and reach TRTC Bus Terminal, Krishnanagar, Agartala. It was flagged off on 16 October 2015 by Manik Dey, Tripura Transport Minister. The Kolkata-Dhaka-Agartala service would reduce by 560 km the distance between West Bengal and the landlocked state of Tripura, which is surrounded by Bangladesh from three sides. Besides the Kolkata-Dhaka-Agartala link, a few other bus services which were also considered like bus services from Kolkata to Jessore, Kolkata to Khulna, and Siliguri to Dhaka. A trial run on the Dhaka- Sylhet-Tamabil- Dawki- Shillong- Guwahati route was conducted on May 22 2016 in order to understand the road conditions and other issues. A trial run had also been conducted on the 500-km route in December 2014.

During Modi's visit in June 2015, the possibility of introducing a second Maitree Express train service (Kolkata-Dhaka) was discussed. The first Maitree express between Dhaka and Kolkata was started on 14 April 2008. There was revival of train links between the two great cities of undivided Bengal after a gap of 43 years. The proposed Maitree second train will run between Khulna and Kolkata. The construction of a modern international passenger terminal was announced by Prime Minister Modi. This will help streamline the process of immigration and customs for passengers travelling by the Maitree Express and other trains. The expeditious work on the elevated rail link between Akhaura and Agartala, likely to be completed by the end of 2017, will help Indian railways begin service between Kolkata and Agartala via Dhaka much like the bus service.

The construction of a bridge over river Feni has been started in Tripura to ferry heavy machines and goods to and from the Northeastern states and the rest of India via Bangladesh through the Chittagong international port. The Tripura government announced in April 2016 that construction work for the 150-metre bridge has begun at an estimated expenditure of Rs. 70 crore. The bridge will connect Sabroom of Tripura with the Chittagong Sea Port via Ramgarh and reduce travel time. There is also a proposal to revive the Kulaura-Mahishasan rail link that will connect Sylhet region of Bangladesh with Barak valley districts of Assam. This link functioned until the 1965 India-Pakistan war but was discontinued after that. Once these rail links materialize, India will have parallel rail and road connectivity between its mainland and the country's Northeast. It also gives India multiple openings between the mainland and different parts of Northeast – to Assam and Tripura for instance. Since India is extending the railways to the capital of Manipur, Imphal and present Railway minister Suresh Prabhu has expressed the hope of extending this to Moreh to connect to Myanmar railway system , it might be a good idea to extend the Kulaura-Mahishashan link to connect Bangladesh rail system to Silchar. Then India can use this route to connect Indian mainland to Myanmar via Bangladesh and Northeast India.

Regime Change as a Factor

After becoming prime minister for the second time in January 2009, Sheikh Hasina radically overhauled Bangladesh's foreign policy approach toward India and brought Dhaka much closer to New Delhi[14]. Consequently, Bangladesh-India bilateral relationship has improved significantly in the past seven years. Besides making significant progress on connectivity issues, India and Bangladesh have developed close security cooperation. Bangladesh has not merely apprehended and handed over large number of Northeast Indian insurgent leaders and activists operating from its soil during previous regimes, but has also cracked down hard against Islamist radical groups who were attacking Indian targets from their bases in Bangladesh. Now that some of these groups—and also a few new Islamist radical organization like Ansarullah Bangla Team and Ansar al Islam – are actively trying to destabilize the country and topple the Hasina government, India has promised all possible help , with Prime Minister Narendra Modi announcing " India will stand shoulder to shoulder with Bangladesh in its fight against terror"[15]. The two countries have not merely signed an Extradition Treaty but also amended it to include provisions for repatriation of suspects (besides convicted criminals) . India has reciprocated by easing tariff on Bangladesh products in Indian market to help address the adverse balance of trade that Dhaka has always complained about. It has also signed and implemented a swap of border enclaves which had till now been one of the unresolved issues between the two countries.

However, the ups-and-downs of India-Bangladesh relations has been traditionally subject to the vagaries of regime change. Whenever Hasina's Awami League has been in power, there has been upswing in India-Bangladesh relations. But whenever the Islamist coalition of Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Jamaat-e-Islami has come to power, relations with India have suffered. When the Islamist coalition was in power in 2001-2006, Bangladesh emerged as the 'second front of Islamist terror' in South Asia. Not only were Islamist radical groups and Northeastern rebel groups using Bangladesh soil to hit out at Indian targets with alarming regularity, but Pakistan's ISI was using Bangladesh for its manifold anti-Indian operations ranging from pumping in fake Indian currency as part of its economic warfare but also using Bangladesh intelligence agencies for arming and funding both Islamist radicals and Northeast insurgent groups[16].

So those who see Bangladesh as the key to the success of India's "Look East" or "Act East" policy tend to obviously raise the issue of regime change. They ask whether the agreements reached between the two countries during Hasina's Awami League government will be honoured in letter and spirit by a BNP-Jamaat government. Two senior BNP leaders have recently told conferences held in India that the party's chairperson has made it clear "India's security concerns will be totally addressed and no rebel groups will be allowed to use Bangladesh territory for attacking India."[17] Another BNP leader has recently said in India that if the BNP came to power, it would honour all agreements signed by the Hasina government with India[18]. Some point to the transport connectivity moves like the Dhaka-Kolkata bus service and the Dhaka-Agartala bus service started during Hasina's first government (1996-2001) as examples that popular initiatives by one government cannot be negated by another even in the highly polarized and surcharged political atmosphere in Bangladesh. Since tens of thousands of Bangladeshis come to India every year for a host of different reasons – medical treatment, pilgrimage to Ajmer Sharif, shopping , education , tourism – and since many of them are not well-off , the cheaper bus and train services are of great help to them. In fact, Bangladeshis have now emerged as the largest segment of foreign visitors to India, accounting for 19.32 percent of foreign visitors to India[19]. The number of Indians travelling to Bangladesh has also risen sharply – the Bangladesh deputy High Commission in Kolkata was now issuing upto 3000 visas a day for Indians visiting Bangladesh for work, tourism, meeting relatives and friends or visiting their ancestral

homes[20].   According to one estimate, nearly half a million Indians were working in Bangladesh – some officially, many unofficially[21]. With so much movement of people between the two countries , that indicates to a growing level of mutual dependence, multiple transport connectivity between India and Bangladesh have become a popular proposition and any government in Dhaka, trying to curb that, would risk a popular backlash.

However, that does not discount the possibility of a future non-Awami League government trying to bargain afresh on issues like transit fees and more quid pro quo arrangements with India. There is a strong feeling in certain circles in Bangladesh that India may use transit for moving military personnel and cargo through Bangladesh during a conflict with China and that Dhaka should ensure that never happens because it is in its national interest to maintain equidistance between India and China. Top Bangladesh economist Rehman Sobhan dismissed such apphrehensions in a recent newspaper article when he said : " Whilst security concerns relating to transit appear to originate in a misperception of military logistics, issues of economic loss and gain from transit appear to be more relevant. "[22]   But Islamist anti-Indian groups frequently play up such fears and could form an important pressure group on a future non Awami League government to cancel Hasina government's decision to provide transit to India for moving goods to India's Northeast from the country's mainland. There have been suggestions that India on its own should raise the transit fees, so that it becomes an important source of revenue for Bangladesh at a time when the country is getting increasingly ambitious to achieve major economic development goals and its budgetary outlays are rapidly increasing. "Once transit fees paid by India become an important source of revenue for Bangladesh, no government, regardless of its party in power, would be able to go back on the arrangement."[23] But as of now, some in Bangladesh are complaining about the transit rates settled between India and Bangladesh, saying they are too insignificant to become an important source of revenue for Bangladesh[24].

Some would argue that Bangladesh's efforts to access the Himalayan countries like Nepal and Bhutan by using Indian territory for securing key resources like hydel-power (Bangladesh's power gap is widening fast) , key markets for its products and raw material from fruits to stone chips (needed for massive construction projects like Padma Rail-road bridge) and markets would be an effective *quid pro quo* for providing India transit to its remote Northeast. The recent opening of the Phulbari-Banglabandha land port is seen as a welcome move in this direction[25]. Bangladesh's present foreign minister A H Mahmood Ali has also said often that his country has a "vested interest" in the development of Northeast which could serve as source of many natural resources and a big market for Bangladesh products[26].

The other serious issue in accessing India's Northeast from the mainland through Bangladesh is the one pertaining to law and order and periodic political instability. In the rundown to the January 2014 parliament elections, when the Opposition BNP-Jamaat coalition unleashed huge street violence, transport was the worst hit. Not only were buses, trucks and trains attacked and burnt down with alarming regularity, but many passengers or drivers were killed and injured. Later when the same coalition unleashed similar violence to bring down the Awami League government in the first four months of 2015, trucks, buses and trains were attacked regularly, leading to deaths of nearly 100 people. Bangladesh's leading business chamber FBCCI calculated the losses on account of the 2015 BNP-Jamaat agitation at 750 billion Taka[27]. The resurgence of Islamist terror has reignited fears of disruptions. Bangladesh has witnessed frequent and intense phases of street agitation to bring down elected governments, both when the Awami League and the BNP-Jamaat coalition have been in power. Transport, both cargo and passenger, have been the worst sufferer. So, transit through Bangladesh will surely suffer huge adverse impact during sustained spells of political instability and

street violence which is a recurring feature of Bangladesh politics. The sea-river route from Indian ports to Chittagong and up the Meghna river at Asuganj and from there by truck overland to Agartala is the best transit route, because overland routes from Chittagong also were badly affected during the 2015 street violence with dozens of trucks burnt down at Sitakunda near the port city[28].

Role of Indian states in Pushing 'Look East' through Bangladesh

Indian states often play a key role in boosting or undermining relations with Bangladesh. The steadfast resistance of West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee to the proposed Teesta river water sharing agreement with Bangladesh has forced Delhi to back off from signing the deal in 2010, when the then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Dhaka. Banerjee refused to join Singh's entourage and publicly opposed the Teesta agreement forcing Singh to back off. Repeated efforts by successive governments have so far not succeeded in getting Banerjee to agree to the deal, despite much backroom parley by Singh's successor Narendra Modi. Banerjee has taken advantage of the compulsions of coalition politics which has forced India's ruling parties like Congress and now the BJP to avoid upsetting regional parties like Banerjee's Trinamul Congress because their support is needed either to stitch together a coalition with sufficient numbers for a majority or at least to pass key legislations like GST bill in the parliament. But the failure to get the Teesta agreement through has impacted adversely on India-Bangladesh relations at a time when it is on an all time high.

After the recent terror attacks in Bangladesh in July 2016, there has been a rise in anti-Indian opinion mobilization by Islamist groups. Sheikh Hasina's confidantes have visited India to impress on Delhi the need to push through the Teesta deal now because, if done, that was seen to be capable of neutralizing the anti-Indian sentiments. That has lent some urgency to the whole issue and the Modi administration has swung back into action. At the time of writing this paper, PM Modi was known to have assigned Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj to work on Mamata Banerjee to get her consent for finalizing the Teesta deal with Bangladesh. This one single issue has proved to be such a dampener on an otherwise high season of bilateral bonhomie between India and Bangladesh.

The frequent outcry over illegal migration from Bangladesh raised in states like Assam also serves to undermine the progress of bilateral relations. The opposition of Assamese regional parties to the land boundary agreement is a case in point. Even the Assam BJP was opposed to the swap of enclaves before Prime Minister Modi decisively intervened to get his state unit on track. But the latest demands by Assam BJP ministers like Himanta Biswa Sarma for treating 1951 as the cut-off date for updating the National Register for Citizens has raised the hackles in Dhaka over possible expulsion of thousands of illegal migrants from an earlier time. Sheikh Hasina's Awami League, seen as pro-Indian in Bangladesh politics, is always looking to project the bilateral relationship as one that would bring in much benefit to Bangladeshis. Issues like Teesta waters or the noise over illegal migration in Assam deflate those expectations at a popular level and considerably inconvenience the League in domestic politics. For an ally who has so steadfastly addressed India's security and connectivity concerns in recent years, the least Indian states and Delhi could do is to avoid creating contentious issues that ultimately backfires on bilateral relations.

In contrast, the role of tiny Tripura has been encouraging and positive in pushing forward the cause of India-Bangladesh relations. When the Hasina government agreed to allow movement of oversized cargos for Tripura's 728MW Palatana gas-fired power project, the Tripura government started lobbying with Delhi for export of 100 MW of electricity to Bangladesh to help it ease it's ever growing power crunch. Such gestures only help Tripura build on its already existing goodwill for having supported the cause of Bangladesh liberation so strongly in the 1960-70s. Even private

initiatives like the Tripura Conclave are trying to cement bilateral relations through its efforts to boost security cooperation. A popular new innovation 'Border *Haats*' that not only facilitates border trade but also enhances people-to-people contact and develops a greater popular stake in connectivity and bilateral relations has very well on Tripura's border with Bangladesh. Now , not only in Tripura but in other neighbouring states like Meghalaya, there is a growing demand for more 'border *haats*' or 'border markets' and for increasing the volume of trade both in number of items and the amount of trading.

A detailed study on India Bangladesh relations by the Observer Research Foundation has suggested six definite steps for Cooperative Border Governance[29].

- First, an India-Bangladesh Bi-national Border Zone (BBZ) extending 15 km on either side of the international border may be demarcated.
- Second, treat the BBZ as a Special Socio-economic Zone with developmental planning and execution vested in the Border Zone Authority, comprising an equal number of administrators from the two countries with a chairman who could be appointed alternately from either state.
- Third, institute 12 bi-national, sub-regional zones extending over a 50 sq km area to be developed as ports of entry and connectivity nodes.
- Fourth, develop integrated services for immigration, customs, judicial services, financial (banking, insurance) services, police, border security and transportation in bi-national, sub-regional zones.
- Fifth, operationalise the zonal systems by combined service cadres from both countries.
- Finally, finance the expenses of operationalising the zonal systems by both states on the basis of proportional trade and revenue.

These proposals are worth serious consideration. The bottomline for success of India's Look East policy -- to connect to South East and East Asia through Northeast -- is to take Bangladesh into confidence, dispel worries that India may use transit for military purposes , push the agenda of all-round multi-modal connectivity through Bangladesh to connect ever so firmly to the remote Northeastern states , make transit a viable source of revenue for Bangladesh's burgeoning economy and work discreetly to ensure political stability in Bangladesh. If any of these goals are less than properly achieved, they could adversely affect India's efforts to connect to its Northeast through Bangladesh. And unless it is able to connect to its Northeast through Bangladesh, its 'Act East' drive is not destined to deliver the kind of result Delhi is seeking to achieve. One cannot conceive of an international highway through the 21kms Chicken Neck (Siliguri Corridor) or a rail corridor to complete the Trans Asian Railway network. Bangladesh is crucial to India's Look East and the best way to achieve India's own domestic goal to connect firmly to its Northeast is to get the connectivity projects going as part of sub-regional or regional groupings like BIMSTEC, BBIN or BCIM. If the proposed Kolkata-Kunming highway goes through Bangladesh or if the Lahore-Agartala SAARC corridor materializes through Bangladesh, Dhaka and a friendly pro-Indian government there will find it easy to concede these projects.

In short, Bangladesh should have a definite stake in India's Look East policy insofar as (a) it can develop the transit to Northeast India as a viable source of national revenue (b) it can use the infrastructure developed for not only domestic movement but for accessing crucial resources in

India's border regions (c) for getting quid pro quo arrangements to use Indian territory to access resources and markets in the Himalayan countries like Bhutan and Nepal.

The security issues are closely linked to connectivity as far as India-Bangladesh relations are concerned. If the present spate of Islamist terror spins out of control in Bangladesh and/or encouarges the political opposition to plunge the country into a new spell of street violence impacting very adversely on movement of goods and people, it will tell upon the positive connectivity infrastructure already developed. How can trucks plying through Bangladesh stranded for days due to ceaseless strikes (bandhs) or ships unable to offload cargo from Indian ports meant for transshipment to Northeast be seen as reliable mode of transport for carrying goods to India's Northeast. One of the reason India went in for the expensive and time-consuming Kaladan Multi-Modal trans shipment project through Myanmar's Rakhine province was because Bangladesh's pre-Hasina regimes were not willing to even consider the issue of transit. The uncertainties caused by the fluid security situation in Bangladesh would actually justify doing up the Kaladan project, despite time and cost overruns, as an alternative if transit through Bangladesh for India's Northeast runs into difficulties. Mizoram is surely the major beneficiary of the Kaladan project but other Northeastern states are not much enthused by it, except as treating it as an emergency alternative for transit throough Bangladesh.

The Tripura government, in response to a letter from India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) for suggestions on trans-regional connectivity, suggested extending rail connectivity from Jawaharnagar in Tripura to Kalay in Myanmar via Darlawn in Mizoram and then onward to Singapore via Thailand. The Tripura government proposal exclusively made available to this writer, argues that from Jawaharnagar in Tripura to Kalay in Myanmar via Mizoram is only 257kms[30] . Tripura, not on India's railway map for almost sixty years after India's independence, is now connected to the Indian railway system through Assam (an Agartala-Delhi train was recently flagged off by Railway Minister Suresh Prabhu) and will also soon be connected to Bangladesh's railway system once the elevated Akhaura-Agartala rail link funded by the Indian government is completed, latest by end of 2017. That gives Tripura the confidence to not only seeks further connectivity eastward to Myanmar and beyond but also to project itself as the future transport hub of India's Northeast. The basis of that confidence stems from its excellent relations with Bangladesh and its direct road and rail connectivity to rest of India through Assam and also Bangladesh. The convenor of the state's leading private initiative, Tripura Conclave, said recently: "For its future growth, Tripura will both look West and look East – look West for access to sea, look East to access South-East Asia and East Asia's hinterland."[31] That is the inescapable geo-physical reality India and its remote Northeast will always have to reckon with.

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Kolkata as a Logistical Hub with Special Reference to the Kolkata Port

Iman Kumar Mitra & Mithilesh Kumar [*]

History, Location, Infrastructure

The main thrust of India's Look East Policy has been to forge sustainable political and economic relationship with its neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia so that it can emerge as a worthy competitor of China as a regional power. After the dismantling of the Soviet Union, its one-time trusted ally in the global supermarket of political manoeuvring, the Indian government led by PV Narasimha Rao quickly realized the strategic potential of improving trade relations, political alliance and communication networks with its neighbours like Bangladesh, Myanmar and Thailand, not only to counteract China's rise as a global superpower but also to assuage its own internal economic crisis which became acute in the early nineteen-nineties.[1] Kolkata features quite prominently in this vision because of its location as the conjunctive urban centre that connects China, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and India's North-eastern region in terms of transport connectivity. But more importantly, being one of the most populated and economically developed cities in India,[2] Kolkata possesses a unique advantage as regards realisation of the Look East Policy. We can describe this advantage along three interlinked axes: history, infrastructure and location.

Rajiv Sikri, a former Special Secretary (Eastern Region), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, with responsibility for the Look East Policy between 2002 and 2006, states in an interview that, due to a flawed approach to Indian foreign policy which celebrated its 'Western orientation' stemming from a colonial hangover, the possible alliances with South Asian countries were overlooked, whereas all these countries share the same 'colonial experience.'[3] The expression 'experience' here has a meaning beyond the 'culturalist' paradigm of postcolonial studies which, oftentimes, by championing the cause of individual consciousness offers a reductionist view of the proliferation of concentric networks of colonialism. If we look closely at the statement of Sikri, we shall find that by 'experience' he means some sort of historical coevalness that has continued to inform the geopolitics of South and Southeast Asia even after all these nations became independent. On one hand, this coevalness is produced by anthropologising the area through various governmental and pedagogical techniques of representation including census and ethnography. On the other hand, it is also a product of endless public and private investments that consolidated infrastructural development in the colonies. For a free and unrestricted movement of capital, this

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region was infested with construction activities leading to building of roads, railways, bridges, and tunnels which would bring different colonies under the rubric of one consolidated infrastructural regime. Needless to say, this infrastructural view of colonialism is incomplete without highlighting the locational specificities that participated in the making of a colonized South Asia.

With this framework in mind, this paper attempts to situate Kolkata along the axes of history, infrastructure and location and tries to analyse how it emerges as a logistical hub in the vision of the Look East Policy. Calcutta (it became Kolkata officially only in 2001) was the first capital of British India and one of the oldest riverine ports in the country. Its history of urbanisation 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. In many ways, Calcutta was the second city of the Empire, right after London, in terms of urban aesthetics and commercial enterprises like its famous jute industry on both sides of the river Ganges. The downfall of the city started to happen reportedly after the shift of capital to Delhi in 1911. The partition of Bengal in 1947 did not only result a huge influx of people from East Pakistan, but also disconnected the supply chain of raw jute to the manufacturing units, causing shutdown of many of these factories. Suddenly it became a city of unending darkness and gruesome poverty that throve on NGO charity and cultural capital of *bhadrolok* politics. However, it continued to function as the gateway for trade in the states in eastern and north-eastern India, Nepal and Bhutan.

In spite of its notorious (but slightly overplayed) backwardness, Kolkata is in the process of revival as the most crucial nodal point under the Look East policy. Due to its locational specificity and historically accumulated infrastructural capital which was lying unrealised for long but is expected to be channelised soon towards revamping the trade networks in South and Southeast Asia, it has a unique advantage over other eastern Indian cities. Both the Indian and Chinese governments have taken cognisance of its potential and have proposed to build two economic corridors respectively – the Amritsar-Kolkata corridor along the Gangetic valley and the Kolkata-Kunming Highway connecting China, Bangladesh, Myanmar and India.

The Kolkata port is also supposed to play a big role in this scheme of things. Located on the left bank of the river Hooghly at Latitude of 22°32'53" North and Longitude of 88°18'5" East, the Kolkata Dock System is one of the oldest dock systems in the county. It is described as the 'gateway to Eastern India for the rest of the world' by the Kolkata Port Trust (KPT), its management authority.[4] Its vast hinterland includes West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Assam, the North Eastern States and the two landlocked neighbouring countries, namely Nepal and Bhutan. It is needless to say that its location is instrumental to revive the maritime trade networks in South and Southeast Asia, and to increase India's political and economic authority over the Bay of Bengal. In view of this, the Government of India has emphasised on its 'modernisation' as a major port linking Chennai (India) with Yangon (Myanmar)and Chittagong (Bangladesh) in its latest scheme titled 'Sagarmala' to improve maritime trade.[5]The modernisation drive will focus on development of efficient coastal transport networks, promotion of port-based special economic zones (SEZ) and ancillary industries and enhancement of tourism and aestheticisation opportunities. The Union Shipping Minister NitinGadkari has recently revealed that the total investment in this project will exceed Rs. 70000 crores.[6]

Having set the context, we may summarize the concern that we shall try to attend in the course of this paper. 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. But how far does this logistical vision take account, make use and replicate the colonial political economy of infrastructural networks? In our understanding, this question is important in order to locate the specific modes of accumulation of built-in capital and political will that contribute to the emergence of Asia as the new leader of post-financial-crisis globalisation. What are those forces, ideologies and negotiations that signify this shift of focus from trans-Atlantic to trans-Asian trade and political networks? How did this imagination come to be and how does it acquire new meanings in public discourses and gather resounding endorsement from individual nation states and private investors? As we shall see in the next few sections, Kolkata, and more specifically its port, often depicted as a hopeless reminder of (post)colonial decadence, transmits useful signals for navigating the murky waters of logistical visions and revisions in South Asia and finding answers to some of these questions.

From 'Look East' to 'Act East'

Twenty years after the launch of the Look East Policy (1994), Narendra Modi, the newly elected prime minister of India, announces at the 2014 India-ASEAN summit that there has been a shift in the approach of the policy, at least 'externally'.[7] The new phase in its life is being called 'Act East' which is supposed to usher in a 'new era of economic development, industrialization and trade' in the country.[8]One may argue that this act of renaming – a shift from the calmness of envisioning to the virtuosity of enacting – is only a rhetorical ploy to divert people's attention from the policy's ineffectiveness in the last twenty years. Others will say that it is in continuation with the neoliberal orientation of the first phase where the 'ideological' standings of India's foreign policy were compromised to cater to demands of 'national self-interest', ultimately leading to protection of private interests and promotion of big capital and militarisation under the banner of pragmatic politics.[9] There is, however, another way to look at this shift, that is, in terms of India's changing relationship with Asian power blocs and regional conglomerates like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).

In this section, we shall provide a narrative of India's engagement with these two organisations in the context of growing recognition of Asia as the leader of globalisation in the twenty-first century. We shall also bring in this scenario another character which proves to be acrucial factor in the imagination of an Asian network of capitalist development – the Asian Development Bank (ADB). We hope to show how ADB's blueprint of a seamlessly connected Asia tries to resolve the dichotomies between national political-economic interests and regional 'development' and facilitate inter-regional infrastructural networks. These networks in many ways replicate and appropriate the older imperial networks, but also distinguish themselves in terms of proliferation of various regional power blocs after decolonisation and their ways of conceptualising the continent as a ubiquitous infrastructural project following the end of cold war and global financial meltdown in the first decade of the new millennium.

In a well structured and detailed essay, David Ludden argues that the charge of globalisation in South Asia today is mediated by a new imperial order led by the United States of America.[10]The first wave of imperial globalisation started in the mid-nineteenth century under the conquering auspices of the British which culminated in projection of British India as 'an official collection of

regions in the world-economy of British imperialism' and created a vast and intricate network of trade and infrastructure in South and Southeast Asia:

> In the 1840s, as parliament considered how to invest state money to improve cotton supplies, government in British India began building infrastructure to cheapen imports and exports, to expand military operations, to increase revenue, and to extend the field of British private capital investment. So began the promotion of state infrastructure investments in economic development. It focused first on plantations, railways, cities, roads, ports, shipping and irrigation.[11]

'Underlying and energising this imperial development regime, vast market integration spawned regions of specialised commercial production around the Indian Ocean,' Ludden continues.[12] Between 1870 and 1914, the mobility of labour, goods and capital increased manifold in this extensively integrated region and distant lands around the Indian Ocean got attached to each other by the imperial design of infrastructural expansion. This design was nonetheless founded on the notion of 'comparative advantage' championed by liberal doctrine of 'free trade' but the role of state-sponsored infrastructure and labour mobility from the coast of Gujarat to that of East Africa was undeniable in production of specialised regional economies, targeted concentration of capital, and a distinctively export-oriented nature of South Asia: 'In 1914, almost all goods arriving at south Asia ports were destined for export: these were mostly cotton, wheat, rice, coal, coke, jute, gunny bags, hides and skins, tea, ores and wool.'[13]

The first phase of globalisation, according to Ludden, started to wane in the nineteen-thirties with the Great Depression and came to end with decolonisation of most of the South Asian countries after the Second World War.[14] The newly independent India undertook a regime of national planning with a strong bias for import-substitution. In terms of its foreign policy, it took a non-alignment position at the outset, but with growing influence of the USA and China in the Indian Ocean region, successive Indian governments focused on having a steady economic and political partnership with the Soviet Russia to maintain both the balance of trade and balance of power. This apparently stable situation was jeopardised after the breaking of the Soviet in the late nineteen-eighties: 'Between 1990 and 1995 trade volumes between the Soviet Union/Russia and India plunged from US $4.2 billion to US $2.2 billion, declining further to US $1.6 billion by 1997-98.'[15] In a series of rude awakenings, India found out that it had lost its primary source of diplomatic benefits, arms supply and technology. The most devastating blow was the stoppage of cheap oil supply whose market price went up many times due to the Gulf War in 1991-92. As India was forced to buy oil from the market, its foreign currency crisis was aggravated: 'by June 1991, India only had enough foreign exchange reserves to cover two weeks' worth of imports.'[16] In plain terms, this was the context of the opening-up of India's economy to foreign direct investment, trade and investment reforms, privatisation, and consequently, the Look East Policy and the beginning of India's rapprochement with ASEAN.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations was founded in 1967 by its first member nations, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Since then it has expanded to include Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Viet Nam. The first document, out of which ASEAN was born, explained that it represented 'the collective will of the nations of Southeast Asia to bind themselves together in friendship and cooperation and, through joint efforts and sacrifices, secure for their peoples and for posterity the blessings of peace, freedom and prosperity.'[17] On 15 December 2008, a Charter of Association was brought into effect at a high-profile meeting of all the foreign ministers of the ASEAN countries at its Secretariat in Jakarta. The Charter serves as a legally binding agreement among the members and lists fifteen purposes of the Association including enhancement

of 'regional resilience by promoting greater political, security, economic and socio-cultural cooperation,' creation of 'a single market and production base which is stable, prosperous, highly competitive and economically integrated with effective facilitation for trade and investment in which there is free flow of goods, services and investment' and maintenance of 'the centrality and proactive role of ASEAN as the primary driving force in its relation and cooperation with its external partners in a regional architecture that is open, transparent and inclusive.'[18]

'Pre-liberalisation' India was sceptic about this 'regional architecture' and viewed ASEAN as an American stratagem to control Southeast Asia.[19] This negative assessment changed into a desperate attempt to gain confidence of the ASEAN countries in the early nineteen-nineties when the then Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao announced the Look East Policy and 'led economic missions to Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam and South Korea to spread the message that India was open for business.'[20] The response from the other side was also positive: 'In the 1995 ASEAN Summit, Singapore's Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong proposed to elevate India to full dialogue partnership, and this proposal received the consent of all the ASEAN leaders. In 1996, India began participating in the ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conferences and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).'[21] The rationale was simple. The ASEAN economies saw in India a huge consumer base and enough political weight to reduce their dependence on China. However be India's location within ASEAN's organisational structure,[22] the economic alliance between them is yet to bloom in its full. India in 2014 has been the ninth largest trading partner with ASEAN (67 billion US dollars of total trade) where as China is still its largest trading partner (366 billion US dollars of total trade in 2015).[23]

One reason of this lacklustre growth is identified as the 'dismal physical infrastructure connections between India and ASEAN markets.'[24] The announcement of the Act East Policy at the ASEAN-India Summit of 2014 is therefore quite significant as both parties agree on the need for infrastructure development and increase of mobility and connectivity in this region. The Chairman's Statement of the 13th ASEAN-India Summit (2015) emphasises the point in clear terms: 'We are also pleased to note various initiatives undertaken by ASEAN and India to promote the ASEAN Connectivity Agenda. We strongly encouraged continuous cooperation between ASEAN and India in this area, in all three dimensions, namely physical, institutional and people-to-people connectivity.'[25]

One initiative among many others is the formation of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).It was formed in 1997, when India had started to gain some prestige from its peers in the 'developed' world, with Thailand's insistence and support from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP):

> At that time it was called BIST-EC i.e. Bangladesh India Sri Lanka Thailand Economic Cooperation. In December of the same year Myanmar joined this organization and then an 'M' was added to it. It became BIMST-EC. It comprised the countries at the rim of Bay of Bengal.[26]

The name was changed once more, but the acronym remained the same, when Bhutan and Nepal joined the association in 2004. The new name is a mouthful – the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation. The sub-regional grouping was intended for increasing trade and cooperation in other areas between two ASEAN countries (Myanmar and Thailand) and five SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation)countries (India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka). A 2014 Brief on functioning of the initiative prepared by

the Indian Ministry of External Affairs mentions that the total population of all BIMSTEC countries taken together consists of twenty-one percent of the world population – a huge source of human capital considering the size of the region.[27]

In 2007, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) conducted a study titled the 'BIMSTEC Transport Infrastructure and Logistics Study' which was endorsed in a BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting in 2009. ADB's interest in the Bay of Bengal region is palpable in the context of increasing energy demands and China's Look South policy which promotes infrastructure development in areas around the Bay: 'Since the [Bay of Bengal] leads to the Malacca Strait, that opens up to the South China Sea (SCS), these routes are crucial to economies in the SCS (China, Japan) – which explains the growing interest and involvement of extra-littoral players in the Bay.'[28] The 'Technical Assistance Consultant's Report' of the aforementioned study points out that BIMSTEC lacks an 'overarching or specific policy on either transport or logistics' and there have been demands from 'below, in the form of its Economic Forum' to introduce such a policy in order to reduce the high cost of moving goods from one member country to another.[29] The Study also derived its inspiration from a Concept Paper published by ADB in 2006, which also 'noted the lack of a developed logistics environment in the BIMSTEC countries due to the limited penetration by third party logistics (3PLs) and the residual reliance on traditional small-scale suppliers of single services.'[30] The Report recommends upgrading all international roads on the BIMSTEC corridors to Asian Highway Class I by 2020, developing a coordinated regional road development programme, upgrading border link roads, connecting landlocked countries like Bhutan and Nepal with railways and solving the problem of restricted draught and limited navigation of large vessels in ports in the northern part of the Bay (Chittagong, Kolkata and Haldia) by constructing deep water ports.[31] Consequently, many projects are underway to overcome the bottlenecks in transport infrastructure with financial and technical support from ADB and the World Bank. Such projects include building of cross-border infrastructure between India and Thailand, construction of port-based SEZs in Myanmar, and planning of an India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway linking Moreh (India) with MaeSot (Thailand).[32]

The Asian Development Bank appears as a selfless, benevolent funder to all regional blocs. However, the revamping of logistical infrastructure in South and Southeast Asia is crucial to the working of ADB as well. ADB, along with the Inter-American Development Bank (1959) andthe African Development Bank (1963), was born in 1966 out of the first-world's desire to transform the developing world into a potential market for its manufacturing industries. According to its website, eighty percent of its lending to its members countries is concentrated in infrastructure, education, environment, regional cooperation and integration, and financial reforms.[33] Most of the money in infrastructure goes into funding improvement of transportation. ADB has already established a programme for its developing member countries (DMC) to promote the concept of 'sustainable transport initiatives':

> While various definitions are possible, a sustainable transport system may generally be considered to be one that allows the basic access and development needs of individuals, companies, and society to be met safely and in a manner consistent with human health. Sustainable transport supports a competitive economy and balanced regional development, and promotes equity, including gender equity, within and between successive generations. Environmentally, a sustainable transport system minimizes the use of land and emissions, waste, and noise.[34]

ADB has observed that by 2020 the countries in Asia and the Pacific will have to invest eight trillion dollars in infrastructure – mostly in development of transport facilities.[35]It has also set a target for itself to increase support for private sector investments in this area: 'private sector development

and private sector operations should reach 50% of total ADB lending by 2020.'[36] It is not surprising, therefore, that the concept of sustainable transport, while approbating the great ideals of ecological awareness and gender equity, needs to take cognisance of 'development needs' of the private companies as well.

This document needs to be read alongside another narrative of ADB's projection of Asia as a steadily growing economic region in spite of various infrastructural bottlenecks – its Regional Cooperation and Integration Strategy.[37]'Physical connectivity is the bedrock of many economic cooperation and integration efforts,' this narrative confirms.[38]But the 'hardware' of physical connectivity – construction of roads, bridges, ports, rail lines – must be in concurrence with its 'software' – legal and regulatory frameworks, systems of customs clearance, etc.[39] In that sense, regional cooperation will require uniform regulatory and fiscal frameworks across borders: 'harmonization of regulations, procedures, and standards.'[40]This combination of hardware and software of infrastructure pertains to the concept of Asia itself as an integrated infrastructural project. Thus multiple publications by ADB and the Asian Development Bank Institute (ADBI) – the research wing of ADB, operating from Tokyo since 1997 – propose to build an infrastructurally 'seamless' Asia.[41]These studies agree that 'the time is ripe for research on cross-regional integration'[42] which will obviate the impending economic crisis. The ongoing political and economic reforms in China, Myanmar and India will also lead to the realisation of a pan-Asian infrastructural network which will require:

- a common vision;
- strong leadership and a shared commitment from Asian leaders, as well as strong partnerships and institutional capacities within and across countries;
- common pan-Asian infrastructure strategies in which infrastructure investment is prioritized, as well as coordinated policies in sectors such as transport and energy;
- institutional arrangements for planning and implementing consistent infrastructure plans at the national, subregional, and regional levels through effective coordination, cooperation, and partnership;
- effective planning and implementation of regional infrastructure projects through good policies and institutions that address the asymmetric distribution of projects' costs and benefits and manage negative socioeconomic impacts across countries so as to ensure win-win outcomes among participating countries; and
- effective financing instruments, as well as conducive policies and regulations that complement public sector financing, help to mobilize the region's vast savings, and encourage PPPs.[43]

David Ludden sees a lot in common in what is happening now and what happened a century before: 'Then there was British Empire, now there is US Empire.'[44] He is right in pointing out how a regime of finance capital is eroding the political authority of the independent nation-states and creating an autonomous space of governance through networks of NGOs and institutions of aid and assistance like the IMF, World Bank, and ADB. But there is more to the story. The contemporary theatre of global capitalism draws its resources not only from the remainders of colonial infrastructure, but also from the political tendency of what Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson call 'patterning the world' in the postcolonial invention of the Area Studies and the regionalism that it promotes:

The rise of area studies...involved an effort to bestow a sense of scientific authority and objectivity on the division of the world into more or less boundable areas, supposedly united by social and cultural features and understood as comparable and thus separable entities. Although there was always debate and uncertainty around the exact arrangement of world regions, by the time of the Cold War, an intellectual consensus and institutional infrastructure had loosely formed around the following geographical units: North America, Latin America, Western Europe, Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, East Asia, Southeast Asia, and Australia and New Zealand.[45]

During the Cold War, these 'regions' played their respective roles as lackeys of the American or the Soviet camp, or, tried to remain unattached like India but finally leaned on either of the two. In early nineteen-nineties, the same regional blocs transformed themselves into cogs of a huge infrastructural machine whose formation and sustenance is coterminous with increasing physical and virtual connectivity between the same regions. This conception of the continent – breakable into regional conglomerates but also presentable as a seamless unity when needed – is impossible without taking the question of infrastructure as its organising principle. Similarly, infrastructure in this context is defined as a political entity whose blueprint is drawn in the interplay of global capital and local aspirations as reflected in the national policies like the Look East. In the next section, we shall see how this interplay is staged in the particular context of Kolkata as a logistical hub in the twenty-first century.

Kolkata as a Logistical Hub

The fact that Kolkata may emerge as a logistical hub needs to be examined in its historically accumulated locational advantage in the erstwhile global empire. The studies on a connected Asia cannot ignore the reality of its centrality with respect to various logistical chains that must be formed to facilitate cross-border movement of labour, capital and commodities. 'In South Asia all corridors originate from Kolkata and Chittagong ports in the Gulf of Bengal,' observes one study on the land connectivity in South and Southeast Asia.[46] The same study mentions that there are 'five possible road corridors for South Asia' – three of which start in Kolkata: the Kolkata–Chicken's Neck [via Siliguri] corridor (Manipur), the Kolkata–Bangladesh corridor, and the Kolkata–Chicken's Neck corridor (Mizoram).[47] It also opines for prioritising some corridors over others in order to 'channel financial resources in an optimum way' and argues that at least two corridors starting from Kolkata (the Kolkata-Ho Chi Minh City corridor [through Chicken's Neck] and Kolkata-Ho Chi Minh City corridor [through Bangladesh]) appear quite promising in terms of distance, road quality, security, trade and tourism prospect and land acquisition.[48] Similarly, six rail corridors have been studied – five starting from Kolkata – of which two from Kolkata are given priority (Kolkata-Hai Phong corridor [through Yunnan] and Kolkata-Ho Chi Minh City corridor [through Chicken's Neck]).[49] The study concludes that the best road and rail corridors to connect South Asia are the Kolkata-Ho Chi Minh City corridor (through Chicken's Neck) and the Kolkata-Ho Chi Minh City corridor (through Yunnan) respectively.[50] The road corridor between Chittagong and Ho Chi Minh City was shorter than the one starting from Kolkata. 'But,' the study maintains, 'as trade and supply chains are concerned, Kolkata with its manufacturing production centers has more to offer.'[51] Possibly the most publicised cross-border transport project from Kolkata is the Bangladesh-PRC-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC) which is more commonly known as the Kolkata-Kunming (K2K) Highway (2490 km). Announced in 2012, its route will cover Kolkata, Dhaka, Imphal, Mandalay,

Lashio, Muse and Kunming: 'A large part of this of this route overlaps with the Trilateral Highway and follows Asian Highways 1 (up to Mandalay) and 14 (from Mandalay to Kunming).'[52]

The matter with the Kolkata Port is slightly different. Notorious for its shallow approach and zigzag estuary, the Kolkata Port has not been a favourite among the experts on maritime trade in South Asia. However, again due to the possibility of being at the centre of numerous road andrail corridors, depleted yet diverse infrastructural facilities and richness of human resources, the Kolkata port has started to gain attention in the discussions of Asian connectivity, especially in the Bay of Bengal region. For example, one of the glaring examples of public-private partnership in the Asian connectivity paradigm is the Kaladan Multi-modal Transit Transport project which is supposed to connect the Kolkata Port to the Sittwe Port in Myanmar.[53]A deep water port will be built at the Sagar Island – 150 km in the downstream of Kolkata – jointly by the Kolkata Port Trust and the government of West Bengal.[54] This Port, along with the one in Haldia, will operate as part of the integrated port system under the Kolkata Port Trust. Apart from taking care of the large vessels which cannot anchor at the Kolkata Port due to restricted draught, it will also work as a military base of India for surveillance of the Bay of Bengal region.[55]

Considering these new developments, one may argue that Kolkata has great potential to emerge as a logistical hub in eastern India with remarkably developed road, rail and maritime connectivity with Southeast Asia. At the same time, one cannot overlook the series of infrastructural activities taking place in the city in the last one decade, although the official reports and experts' commentaries on these projects do not always match. The website of West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation (WBIDC) tells us that one of the major road connectivity projects completed in the last few years with ADB's support is the North-South Economic Corridor connecting Kolkata and Haldia Ports with the districts in north Bengal.[56]However, an account provided by Ashok Lahiri, a former Chief Economic Advisor of the Government of India and the current Chairman of Bandhan Bank, portrays ADB's 'mixed experience with developing the north-south corridor.'[57]ADB's role in development of the North-South corridor dates back to 1998 when it provided 'technical assistance' in planning the corridor along National Highway 34. The loan for the project was approved in 2001 and became effective in 2003. Since then, Lahiri informs, it has been a saga of delayed action, shortage of staff and contentions over land rights and resettlement:

> land acquisition and resettlement activities were delayed in some cases due to disputes over shareholding, non-mutated documents, and lack of updated revenue records, as well as weak capacity of the implementing agencies; and the number of affected people at completion were double that in the resettlement plan. The loan took longer to become effective, and the project took even longer to be implemented.[58]

'In short, project implementation in West Bengal is an arduous task. It becomes especially difficult if it involves land,' concludes Lahiri. ADB also tends to think in the same line. In its completion report on the corridor, ADB lists few lessons from the project which includes the necessity of ensuring (a) 'project readiness' during the first rounds of appraisal, (b) 'capacity' of the implementation agency and (c) 'tight monitoring' of the project involving high-level officials.[59]It has also taken notice of the gap between preliminary surveys of the land situation and resettlement plans and the ground reality during actual implementation of the project: 'In future projects, a detailed resettlement plan should be prepared with an almost final estimation of inventory of loss, land requirements, and availability of the right of way.'[60]

This urge to ensure exactitude regarding calculations on land is part of ADB's concept of 'sustainable transport' which must minimise 'waste' and 'noise' both literally and metaphorically – in

terms of 'environmental' challenges and handling of disputes and resistance. Ironically, it becomes more difficult day-by-day as, unlike the olden days of unconcerned progress of imperial variety, ADB is also keen to alleviate poverty and guarantee socioeconomic improvement, and hence, cannot suppress all the noises under its clamour of sheer developmentalism. This new order of imperialism is also geared to transform the social infrastructure which will embody and preserve the physical and virtual infrastructure. The 'social' in this scenario is not an unperturbed outside which provides a mere context to all that is happening. It is a continuous process of negotiations and renegotiations between different agents of growth, interplay of interests and concerns over the size of the clientele, recognition and reorganisation of the patterns of the world(s) that we inhabit. The Kolkata Port, with all its limitations, may be described as a model of such instances of socialisation of infrastructure.

As we know, amid the hue and cry over the decline of the Kolkata Port and its difficult navigational attributes, it has managed to survive and grow over the last few years. According to the Port Trust, the survival of the port depends on its unique feature as a riverine port which many would consider its main drawback. The zigzag estuary of the port demands certain kind of sharpness of mind and ability to encounter the river as a living organism which is almost human in its deceptive demeanour. Thus the lack of cutting-edge technology is compensated by a narrative of interface between human dexterity and non-human predicaments. This interface is most aptly captured by a veteran pilot working (on) the river: 'Computers can work wonders but, for handling ships in the river Hughli [*sic*] we will still require quick judgement of a river pilot.'[61] Clearly, this narrative of a human surplus over machinic accuracy is an instance of socialisation of infrastructure where a lack is redefined as the signature character of logistical operations. But more importantly, it indicates the ingenuity with which a debilitating factor is converted into a positive sign of triumphing humanity.

Other studies on the Kolkata Port have come up similar stories where enterprise on the river is 'profoundly shaped by the actions and reputations of exemplary men, who are Kolkata Port Trust bureaucrats.'[62] According to Laura Bear, neoliberalism in India has created an environment of 'populist speculation' where privatisation, banking reforms and reorganisation of public debt have infused a culture of speculative investment in every individual and threatened the existence of bureaucratic institutions like the Kolkata Port Trust.[63] In response, these institutions start to recoup by emphasising the ingenuity of their respective speculative enterprises and grounding these moments of ingenuity in the essential function they play as harbingers of social relations. This combination of speculative reasoning, managerial expertise and social responsibility makes the port, as described by the editor of a volume of essays on the Kolkata Port published by the Port Trust, 'nothing more than an artifact' which can be put to many uses depending on the 'complex interplay of many social forces manifested as stakeholders.'[64] These stakeholders are not necessarily human; they could be social motivations like the demands of the hinterland, natural factors like the tidal flow, or cultural determinants like the organisation of the Port Trust. The question of skill also makes an appearance in this description. 'Anticipation of the motives of the society certainly calls for skill,' the editor informs, 'but one has to endeavour to acquire such a skill. If otherwise, the operators of this artifact (such as the Port) believes [*sic*] that it can handle the affairs as an autonomous entity, then it can only condemn itself by holding on to false promises.'[65] Socialisation of infrastructure is not confined to recognition of social elements as stakeholders in the speculative regimen of (dis)investment; it also energises the same regimen by making skilful calculations that will anticipate change. In the face of increasing pressure from funding agencies like ADB to become more efficient and economically self-dependent, the skill to socialise infrastructure makes a call upon history. On one hand, the nostalgia of a glorious past (when the urban infrastructure of an imperial city was coterminous with the development of its port) is invoked to envision an equally glorious future;[66] on

the other hand, the plan of self-financing of the port hinges on the historically accumulated possession under its control – urban land.

The Ministry of Shipping of India has been issuing Policy Guidelines for the use of land by the major Port Trusts since the passing of the Major Port Trusts Act, 1963. According to the Act, the lease of any immovable property including of land to private parties must not exceed thirty years without prior approval of the Central Government.[67] In 2012, a draft policy for land management by the major ports was proposed by the Ministry of Shipping. It was finalized in 2014 after inter-ministerial consultations and interventions by the Indian Ports Association.[68] The main objectives of this policy are to ensure optimization of use of land resources and transparency of land-related transactions.[69] However, it also states that separate policy needs to be formed for the land holdings in township areas in Kolkata and Mumbai, two of the most heavily populated urban centres in India.[70]

Accordingly, a document regarding 'Land Use Plan/Zoning' of the estate of the Port Trust in Kolkata (under the jurisdiction of the Kolkata Dock System) has been prepared and uploaded in the website of the Port Trust in January 2016 to invite comments and suggestions from the citizens of India.[71] In this scheme, the land parcels are distributed among 33 zones specifying the location, prevailing land use patterns, and recommended changes in such patterns. To give an example, Cossipore (Zone 1) which now has a concentration of residential buildings and business and educational establishments should in coming years must become a tourist hub with riverfront open spaces, plaza, recreational centres and mercantile storage options.[72] Most of these zones are recorded in the document to have similar concentration of residential and business housings. The proposed land use plans, of course, differ according to the locational specificities. Whereas Cossipore and the land adjacent to Circular Canal from Chitpur in North Kolkata to Tolly'sNullah in the South (Zone 2) are recommended for landscaping, tourism activities, parks and other recreational facilities, the land close to the dock in Garden Reach (Zone 3) is suggested to be preserved for mercantile activities, extension of existing industrial establishments, storage, dry docking, boat and vessel repair, cargo handling, port related allied facilities, and jetties.[73]

The document also contains 'Remarks' from the issuing authority about each zone. Most of these remarks start with a prosaic declaration: 'The proposed land use is largely in conformity with LUDCP [Land Use and Development Control Plan] of KMDA [Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority].'[74] However, in few cases, we find certain interesting observations. In Chetla (Zone 22), the document has recorded existence of small workshops along with residential buildings. Noting that these workshops do not conform KMDA's land use policy, the document opines, 'Considering reality, the existing workshops may continue with permission of KMDA.'[75] Similarly, for the land between Nityadhan Mukherjee Road and Jagat Banerjee Ghat Road and the adjacent area (Zone 24), the recommendations consist of leases to assembly, storage, business and mercantile establishments, and not residential buildings, but '[b]ecause of high potential of the area for use as residential purpose in future, the Land Use may be reviewed after 10 years to explore whether the same may be confined to residential buildings only.'[76]Apart from pointing to the Port Trust's interest in turning the land under its possession into profitable enterprises and emerging as the largest rent-seeking institution in Kolkata (indeed it is the largest landholder in the city), this document also refers to KMDA as a new stakeholder in the world of logistics and port infrastructure. Urban development and land speculation, thus, become crucial factors in revival of the port and its self-fashioning as a rentier institution. The rent income is yet to become a major source of its revenue, but the annual Administrative Report (2013-14) shows a small increase in rent and premium on leased land (2.41 crores) from the previous year. However, the Port Trust is expecting to have a 14% increase in revenue from leasing its land in the fiscal year of 2015-16.[77] Meanwhile, it is fighting other legitimate

and illegitimate stakeholders of urban development to posit its claim in the game of rent-seeking in the city, as M. T. Krishna Babu, the newly appointed Chairman of the Kolkata Port, takes a pledge to fight the 'tanker mafia' who force the importers of edible oil in Kolkata and Haldia to take the route via road in spite of availability of a cheaper route via train.[78] Interestingly, the newspaper covering the incident describes it as an effect of the expanding 'Syndicate Raj' – a term usually associated with the land mafia involved in illegal land speculation and supply of building materials in the urban townships burgeoning the city.

Fissures in the Hub

In the final section of the paper, we shall briefly discuss another crucial element of logistical governance at the Kolkata Port – the question of labour.[79] Labour has always been a controversial issue whenever there is a discussion on the myth of the port's 'decline'. Often it was labelled as some kind of burden responsible for slowing down the rate of growth or the so-called modernisation of the port – a familiar argument often heard in the milieus that endorse privatisation. In the last few decades, the character of labour in the Kolkata Port has gone through some major shifts and a pertinent place to study these shifts is the Dock Labor Board (DLB) that employed workers for loading and unloading cargo mainly at the port.

These workers were not deployed for shore-related jobs, for which there was another category of 'shore workers.' Shore workers were covered under the Major Port Trust Act 1963. DLB was merged with the Kolkata Port Trust in 2010. This was after the DLB had exhausted its funds and was finding it difficult to pay the pensioners. At the time of the merger, the number of employees under the board was 350. The number of pensioners was as high as 7000. The ravages that DLB has had to go through are symbolised by its present physical condition and its tremendous potential as future real estate. It has 36 counters, all closed now, rusting because it has been unused for years now. This is the spot where workers would have lined up in thousands to collect their wages. The office inside is equally big but now dark and dank. This office is spread on a big piece of land upward of one acre as the office-in-charge told the researcher. The real estate sharks cannot monetize it because of the 7000-odd pensioners will not give their right to pension and hence the space to land sharks and ensure that the office is not razed down to the ground. It is, as if, the labour-power of the workers that has been stored in form of monies keeps the structure intact although they are unable to revive it because they can no longer sell their labour-power.

Dock Labour Board is the symbol of a bygone era of permanent jobs and social security schemes like medical and life insurance, pensions, etc. This worker has given way to contract workers working in tough and hazardous conditions without a stable job or any form of social security. In fact, they get work only when a vessel arrives at the port and always through predatory contractors. The workers are hired on *sardari* system which is classical jobber system. A person known as the *sardar* (head) recruits around 50 workers under him and put them to work under a contractor. A *sardar* who is also a worker at the docks gets more wages than those who work under him. Workers under a given *sardar* at Kidderpore docks get wages that are decided on the basis of the 'tons' they have lifted. A subtle change in technology has occurred to increase the intensity of work. Previously each sack could carry 100 kgs of commodities now the sacks come with the capacity of 50 kgs. As some old workers said it has lightened the burden and the task which had to be performed earlier but it also means that they have to work longer and quicker to unload a ship. The intensity of work has increased enormously. An innocuous and as mundane a tool of work as the sack can perform the same task of intensifying and informalising works as advanced automation on the docks is capable of

doing. Manual labour or 'unskilled' labour are equally controlled by technological innovation. Also, the sacks were earlier made of jute but now are made of plastic threads. This makes quite a lot of difference in the comfort of performing the task as it was easier to grip the jute sack but the workers say that now they have adapted to the technology although it was a prolonged process.

Most of the workers who work at the Kolkata port have traditionally been migrant workers. The composition of the migrant workers has changed over the period of time. In the beginning, which is to say till the 1980s, most of the workers (up to 80%) were from Bihar. The regions of Bihar which primarily specialised in dock works were: Patna, Bakhtiarpur, Nawada, Darbhanga, Begusarai, Barauni, Ara, and Chhapra. Some of them also came from Balia in Uttar Pradesh but it is part of the wider Bhojpuria region. Workers from these areas came to develop an expertise of dock work and loading and unloading of cargo. The perception that prevailed among the contractors is that workers from these regions of Bihar are sturdy and hardworking. Thus, the logistics of labour supply was and has been in place for close to one-and-a-half centuries.

The fortunes of the Kolkata port and the migrant labour from Bihar are related. The restructuring has happened simultaneously and one can detect the changes that have been wrought in the relationship between workers from Bihar and the port. The workforce coming from Bihar has declined steadily and has been replaced by intra-state workers from West Bengal. Again, the pattern is almost the same in the sense that some regions of West Bengal have gained specialisation in dock works. The areas that have emerged in West Bengal to supply labour for Kolkata docks are Murshidabad, Sundarbans and Burdwan.

The decline in migration of labour from Bihar to Kolkata port is mainly due to the reason that the logistics of labour in West Bengal is cheaper than that in Bihar. According to the contractors, the labourers from West Bengal are paid maximum of around INR 350 per day while those from Bihar had to be paid INR 500 per day. The condition of work is tougher for them and availability of jobs highly unpredictable and irregular. The availability of work is dependent on the number ships that come ashore. The number of ships is then dependent on the larger economic condition. The running joke among the contractors is that if one has to understand the way Indian economy is going one should come at the docks. At the time of the fieldwork the prices of pulses were at an all-time high and the frequency of ship carrying pulses was accordingly high as the government decided to import huge quantities of pulses. The ship that was moored at that point of time was carrying pulses from Ukraine. A ship that carries 7000 tons of goods takes seven days to unload and 500 workers are put for the job. The pulses in the ship come loose. They have to be put in the sack, have to be sewn which is a specialised work which happens in the ship and then has to carried either to the trucks or the warehouses in the dock depending on the importer. Sewing as well as packing is a task done by both men and women. It is only carrying of the goods that are exclusively male. The wages of women are lower than that of men and ranges between INR 200-300. The other job that they have to do is to sweep the cargo that has fallen on the ground and pack them and move them to the warehouse. When the vessel is at the docks, the work is done almost round the clock. To give an idea of the intensity of work a worker said that they carry around 1000 bags in a schedule of 20 hours' work. There is a competition between the workers to carry as much bags as the wages are dependent on number of bags carried. Sine, work is based on ships arrived they want to carry as much as they can to maximize their wages to cover the days of no work.

Kolkata port is a space of precarious work. It has a huge workforce of contract labour and informal work and a space that is also heavily securitised and constantly under surveillance. Forms of coercion and violence are both from formal actors of the state such as the police and paramilitary and also more dangerously from the informal violence of several non-state actors that include party

workers of the ruling party, shady contractors providing parking spaces, small contractors of labour and commodities, and numerous unaccounted individual who crisscross the port in search of opportunity to smuggle or steal goods. This is the underbelly of the Kolkata port which is responsible for the movement and control of labour as well as goods. In that sense, they are the last mile of governance that acts directly on the body of the worker. These are the political subjects who are unruly and ungovernable – the workers and the urban poor – who resist and force the government to modify its plans, thereby affecting the planning edifice of Kolkata or any other infrastructural installation for that matter.

We have began the paper with an interpretation of the shift from Look East to Act East as a response of the Indian government to the increasing importance of South and southeast Asia in the new global economic order following economic meltdown in the West. Kolkata, with its locational advantage in the Bay of Bengal region, will surely hold a special position in this scheme where hobnobbing with regional blocs like ASEAN and BIMSTEC must be envisioned in terms of replication of an imperial design of infrastructural development. Towards the end of the paper, we have discovered that the port in Kolkata also offers a curious example of postcolonial infrastructure characterised by the ingenuity of projecting weakness as strength and promptness of anticipating social change. The reason Kolkata may emerge as a logistical hub is not limited to its locational advantage and historical legacy; it is also because of its ability to socialise infrastructure and flexibility to cater to the demands of a changing time. It seems the impact of the contemporary Asiatic modes of production and circulation operate at two levels: globally, it binds the postcolonial regional blocs in the implementation of a ubiquitous infrastructural project laid out all over the continent, and locally, it responds to various types of interaction between social forces, economic interests and institutional ingenuity. It remains to be seen how the bridge between the local and the global is constitutive of the social mapping of infrastructure as a means of 'patterning' the world. Perhaps the answer to the puzzle lies in the apparently elusive link between interest and rent – the two types of income from infrastructure – in the postcolony. Presently, it is a mere speculation but, as our somewhat episodic narrative indicates, a trail worth pursuing for future research.

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